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STAMPEDE STEVE; or, THE DOOM OF THE DOUBLE FACE.

BY "BUCKSKIN SAM"—Major Sam S. Hall.

AUTHOR OF "DIAMOND DICK," "THE TERRIBLE TONKAWAY," "KIT CARSON, JR.," "BIG FOOT WALLACE," ETC.



AS STEVE LIFTED THE SENSELESS MAIDEN, HE PERCEIVED THAT THE HORNS OF THE SLAIN BEAST HAD NOT INJURED HER—
THAT SHE HAD ONLY SWOONED.

Stampede Steve;

OR,

The Doom of the Double Face.

BY BUCKSKIN SAM,

(MAJ. SAM S. HALL.)

AUTHOR OF "KIT CARSON, JR.," "MOUNTAIN MOSE," "DANDY DAVE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A SWEET SURPRISE.

"HOLD, Nero! You are trampling some of the most beautiful flowers I have found this morning. I must have some of those blooming creepers for a wreath. What a delicate pink! I do think they are perfectly lovely!"

The speaker sprang lightly to the ground before the words had left her lips, proving by her movements that she was a skilled equestrienne.

Beautiful were her surroundings; but a loveliness that is more striking must first claim our attention.

The fair rider was a maiden of some sixteen summers; a daughter of the Sunny South. Of medium height, her form was well developed, and she was sprightly and graceful as a young antelope of the prairies.

Her hair was of a golden brown, and hung in rippling, wavy masses, to her waist, being partially confined by a wide-brimmed Gypsy hat, and a light blue ribbon, loosely secured below the ears in a jaunty bow.

Her face was purely Grecian in type, and her color was now deepened by a canter in the cool and bracing air of the morning. Eyes of a heavenly blue, and ripe lips, the form of a Cupid's bow, which, parting as she spoke, disclosed two rows of small and even pearly teeth.

She was attired in a neat-fitting riding-habit of light green; the skirt sufficiently short, so as not to retard her movements in mounting without assistance. As she now stepped gracefully forward, and lifted it partly from the dewy grass, a pair of small French boots, with high tops, were disclosed to view.

A neat lace collar, turned over a ribbon of pink, was confined at her fair throat by a five-pointed star of gold; and about her slender waist was a wide but carelessly crumpled scarlet scarf, the long fringed ends of which hung to the lower edge of her skirt.

A gold-mounted riding-whip was secured loosely to her right wrist by a loop; and at her left side, held in place by her sash, were a handsome revolver, a Colt's "five-shooter," and a miniature bowie-knife.

Such was the maiden whose words open this first chapter of our narrative.

She was a Texan girl, Dora Dale by name; and we introduce her to the reader at a short distance from that beautiful and romantic stream, the Rio Guadalupe, which courses through a most fertile and lovely portion of the Lone Star State, rising north of the Bandera Hills, and emptying into Espiritu Santo Bay in the Mexican Gulf.

To the north of Dora's position could be plainly seen the timber of the river, towering—a dense, dark green, vine-tangled, moss-draped wall of verdure—above the scattering live-oaks which fringed it at this point. This was but a short hour's gallop from the town of Gonzales.

Here and there were small *mottes* of oaks, beneath the lower branches of which was thick undergrowth; and this fact prevented the lovely flower-gatherer from gaining a view of the far-stretching open prairie to the south.

In such near proximity to the river-bottom was Dora Dale that the grass and flowers grew rank and thick toward it, giving one grand view of Nature's most lavish luxuriance.

Bars of golden sunlight shot through the green enameled foliage of the oaks; and between the same the small "opens" were flooded with the golden glow—the first kisses of Old Sol, just from his oriental journey. And where the light of the day-god shone, the tens of thousands of dew-drops—the tears of Nature—hung like glittering jewels from leaf and blade, lending a most brilliant effect to the scene.

The horse from which the fair girl had alighted, was a medium-sized, clean-limbed half-breed, of Spanish and mustang stock, and black as ebony.

The animal was a beauty, and built for speed and endurance, as are nearly all beasts of the blood mentioned. Its eyes were large and intelligent, and its fiery nature was shown by a continual stamping and tossing of the head.

Well were maid and mustang suited to each other, the two forming a perfect picture of equestrian grace and beauty.

A saddle and bridle of fine workmanship, and a neck-rop of horse-hair, artistically woven and secured in a coil to a loop on the saddle, made up the equipments; but Dora, in her joy at discovering some rare flowers, had neglected to loosen the coil and retain the slack of the rope in her hand, as a precaution in case her restive animal should dash away, and leave her on foot, as the actions of the Mustang seemed to indicate

that it wished to do, although its evidently increased alarm had not been noticed by its mistress.

Sinking to the earth, Dora carefully brushed aside the dewy grass and drew long, wiry creepers from the same. No sooner had the young girl disturbed these vines from their natural position than a most fragrant odor arose from the flow-rets, causing exclamations of delight to escape her lips, as she seated herself and then removed her hat, proceeding to decorate it in a tasteful manner with her gleanings.

"Lovely, indeed," she said; "and so delightfully fragrant! Why, I never have seen such tiny beauties! And the perfume is as strange to me as it is sweet. Oh, I do hope they are to be found where papa is going!"

"I presume they are, and many others that I have never seen. They say the prairies west of San Antonio are covered with the most beautiful and fragrant flowers. How the birds do sing!"

"This is just lovely. Papa thought I would not like it, but it is a real pleasure excursion to me."

"However, I shall be obliged to remain near those horrid wagons, I suppose, after we get further west, or get 'corraled,' as the teamsters say, by Indians, or torn to bits by bears and panthers."

"I think Nero ought to be able to take care of me by running from any such dangers, if I were ever so far from the train."

"Heigh-ho! I'll not worry about my liberty being curtailed until the time comes. Then we shall see what we shall see."

Thus speaking, in a flute-like voice and rapid manner, Dora proceeded to finish the floral decoration of her hat, breaking out, as she finished, in a simple song with a lively air.

As the maiden had ridden amid the oaks, she had at times cast sweeping glances through the vista of trees, but no moving object had she detected. Indeed, there was nothing within the scope of vision that gave evidence of life except the birds.

We have mentioned, however, that Nero was more excited—in fact, showed symptoms of alarm—as his mistress had sprung from the saddle; and had not Dora been so intent upon the rare flowers she had discovered, she would have noticed that her favorite betrayed unusual symptoms of fright.

Again, had she not spoken in soliloquy and then gave vent to her exuberant spirits in song, she would have heard sounds that were alarming to her as well as to her horse, and would have mounted and sped on the back trail immediately.

The mustang, as his mistress knelt upon the sward, all at once became motionless, facing the south, it being but a couple of rifle-shots in distance from the open plain. He then elevated his head and pointed his ears forward in a listening attitude, while his large eyes, filled with suspicion and alarm, became fixed toward the plain.

From that direction came a dull, rumbling sound, mingled with yells, which were, however, barely distinguishable as proceeding from excited men.

A listener, familiar with the stock-raising districts of Texas, would have known at once that men were running cattle, perhaps lassoing beeves, or driving stock that had strayed from their range; or, it might be, collecting a herd to run into a corral, and brand, mark or separate them.

A practiced ear would also have detected the sound of the fast-flying hoofs of a single animal, afar from the general din, and much nearer to the spot where Dora Dale was gathering flowers.

This sound approached, drew nearer and nearer—a fact that Nero seemed to realize, for his nostrils became distended, his eyes flashed, and he stepped about in evident alarm. Then with a snort of affright, the animal half-whirled and galloped madly toward the bottom-timber.

The young girl sprang to her feet, cast a hurried glance south, east and west, but saw nothing to alarm her, and the noise made by the hoofs of her own horse mingled with the sounds of the same character which had alarmed Nero. She, therefore, heard not the approach of danger until it was too late to avoid it.

Erect stood the beautiful maiden, gazing in astonishment toward her fast disappearing horse.

This was only for a moment, however, for she was soon attracted by the sound of a crashing of bushes, and the slight pallor which before had been noticeable in her face was now increased to ghastliness. And well might it be so, for the sight that was soon to meet her eyes was an appalling one.

Just as she turned, out, crashing from an adjacent *motte*, and darting toward her, came a huge black steer—the animal maddened to frenzy!

The horns of the beast were long and sharp, its eyes like two coals of fire, and its tongue protruding from its frothing mouth. On shot that

massive black beast, its hair glossy and glittering, while around the base of its horns was the tightly drawn noose of a lasso, the slack of the same flying behind it. The mark, too, of the branding-iron could be plainly seen.

This was large and fresh, and a stockman would at once have known that the steer had but recently been lassoed, hurled to the earth and branded. Not only this, but the animal was a "Maverick," which proved it to be wild and fierce, and of extraordinary strength. Had this not been the case, it would have been branded before it had reached the age of four years, and its full growth.

The long, slender horns of the beast were sharp-pointed and lance-like, the fierce head hanging downward, and the brisket and lolling tongue brushing the grass.

It had, without doubt, escaped its skilled captors.

Electric-like flew the hoofs.

The steer, frantic with rage and pain, dashed directly toward the young girl, bellowing madly; its bloodshot eyes glaring upon her, and its legs spread, to give power to its terrible charge, and to prevent being overthrown by the expected shock.

Strange to say, the maddened brute stopped within fifteen feet of the poor terrified girl.

Then, with fiercer bellowing, it pawed the sward, and tore up the earth, doubly enraged when it caught sight of the scarlet scarf that was worn by the maiden.

So horrified and dumfounded was Dora at this totally undreamed-of and deadly danger—there seeming no possible way to escape death—that she stood in her tracks, dazed and unable to move. She was, indeed, paralyzed with terror, her fixed position having doubtless been the cause of the beast's halting, as it recognized an upright form, resembling those of its recent persecutors and torturers.

Only for a moment did the mad steer pause. The red scarf about Dora's waist appeared to doubly infuriate the beast; and, ceasing to paw the ground, it lowered its head, gathered all its immense muscular force, and shot forward with a terrible and unearthly roar of frantically furious madness!

Like as if suddenly transformed to stone, ghastly as the dead, her eyes fixed and starting, glassy, and filled with dread terror and deathly despair, her tongue cleaving to the roof of her mouth, powerless to move or speak. Thus stood Dora Dale!

An instant more, and the long lance-like horns would be plunged through that fair form, and she be tossed in the air, and then fall, and be gored and trampled beyond the semblance of humanity!

But, in that one brief instant, the sharp whip-like report of a rifle sounded on the still morning air, and the huge black brute fell dead, the blood gushing from mouth and nostrils, at the very feet of its intended victim.

And, as an echo to the report of the rifle, out from the lips of the maiden came a soul-searching shriek of mortal terror and deathly horror; but with that wild cry, was banished all sense, for the time.

Up in air went her arms, in hopeless despair; and forward, prone between the horns, and upon the very neck of the dying brute, fell Dora Dale!

CHAPTER II.

NO OFFENSE MEANT AND NONE TAKEN.

BUT some forty paces to the west of the point where Dora Dale had dismounted from Nero, to pluck the flowers, was a small but dense *motte* of live-oaks; and, to the southwest, about the same distance from both, was a larger clump of trees, the undergrowth being less thick.

From this last it was, that the mad steer had rushed, having plunged into it from the south side, as it dashed through the scattering trees from the open plain.

Before reaching this shelter, it had been seen by one, who was riding slowly from the timber of the Guadalupe obliquely from the northwest. This was a young man, of perhaps twenty years of age, and one who would command attention and admiration in any assemblage, even in one of distinguished men.

He was above the medium height, his form a type of perfect manhood, his face handsome, and his eyes clear and hazel; while the eager glance, and the instantaneous clutch and coil of lasso when he perceived the infuriated beast, as well as his costume and arms, indicated that he was one who was accustomed to the free life on the plains.

His symmetrical form hinted at unusual strength, and his movements were grace itself.

Long dark-brown hair hung, in wavy masses, low over his well-rounded shoulders, while a goatee and mustache, silky in fineness and gloss, added to the manly beauty of his face, which was tanned by sun and wind.

Buckskin breeches, fringed, and ornamented with silver buttons down the outer seams, were sustained about his waist by both belt and silken red sash. The breeches were thrust into the tops of high-legged boots of calfskin, upon the heels of which were buckled a pair of silver spurs, with but medium-sized rowels.

A blue woolen shirt, with wide collar loosely confined at the neck by a black kerchief, and a black wide-brimmed sombrero, made up his semi-Mexican costume.

A brace of revolvers, Colt's army size, and a huge bowie, were in scabbards at his belt, while a Snarp's carbine hung at his saddle-born.

His equipments were of the best workmanship, and in everything, he had the air and manner of a prairie roamer, if not a skilled scout.

Strongly marked for endurance, as well as speed, was the animal he rode; a beauty, and its every movement, grace, fire, and vim.

The horse was a dark bay, with an abundant mane and tail of wavy hair; its forelock hanging, when not at speed, below its eyes, which were large, and unusually expressive.

Such was Stephen Speed, a well known ranger and scout of West Texas, a little more than twenty years ago.

He was commonly called Steve, or Steve the Scout; and, by some, Stampede Steve, from the fact that he was a headlong rider, and skilled in stampeding herds of mustangs into trap-corals, on the upper Rio Nueces, or elsewhere.

A perfect type of a daring Texas scout was Steve; and, as he discovered the on-plunging, maddened steer, with the tell-tale lasso about its neck, which explained its fury, he immediately coiled and adjusted the loop of his own lariat. As thus described, man and mustang presented a sight to rivet the gaze and admiration of any observer.

Erect sat Steve in his saddle, the slack of his lasso coiled over his left arm, the end of it being attached to his saddle-horn. Thus prepared, he gave a slight hiss, and his noble, well-trained horse shot forward, toward the northern side of the little *motte*, which hid Dora Dale from the young scout's view. Well he knew that, maddened as the brute was, it would not remain long in the clump of oaks into which it had so frantically dashed; and his intention was to spur out from behind the *motte*, upon the reappearance of the animal, and lasso it. He would then regain the rope from its neck, and hold it, until those who were probably in chase should come up.

But a most astounding surprise awaited Steve, and instantly changed his plans.

First, as he reached the little *motte* toward the river, from behind it bounded a beautiful black horse, saddled and bridled, the animal speeding headlong with snorts of affright.

Instantly the young scout dropped the lasso coil over the horn of his saddle, clutched his carbine, and springing to the ground, bounded around the *motte* to a position that commanded a view of its eastern side. There he stood, bewildered at the sight of the terrified maiden.

Never before had he beheld such angelic beauty and grace. Pallid as a corpse she stood, unconscious of the presence of the young man, who for the moment was rendered as powerless as herself by her unearthly loveliness and fearful danger. At once it flashed upon him that he was too late; and, indeed, he would have been, had not the steer halted to bellow madly and tear up the sod in a challenge to conflict.

Not an instant longer did the amazement of the young man delay him. Up went his weapon to his shoulder, and he glanced over the sights.

The life of the maiden depended upon his skill.

The beast was broadside to him, and consequently to shoot it through the brain was impossible.

Besides, to render such a shot as he was obliged to make more difficult, the maddened brute was plunging onward toward its intended victim as the scout took aim.

Like a man of iron stood Steve, every nerve and muscle rigid, and his carbine as steady as if held in a vise. A moment after, the weapon belched fire and was hurled to the earth, as the young man jerked his revolver and bounded forward, ejaculating loudly:

"Thank God! Thank God!"

The bullet had done its work well. The huge black brute had been pierced through the vitals.

As Dora Dale threw up her arms and shrieked, the young scout gave vent to his tortured feelings in a deep groan; but as Steve lifted the senseless maiden, he perceived that the horns of the slain beast had not injured her—that she had only swooned.

In the whirl of agonizing emotions that had ruled him as he rushed forward, Steve at first feared that his sense of sight had deceived him, and that the young girl had been killed. These first startling emotions having been banished, he strode toward the clump of oaks and looked toward the south for any sign of the pursuers of the steer he had just shot.

Seeing no indications of being intruded upon, his handsome face assumed an expression of relief, which soon changed to the most intense admiration.

Upon his arm now rested that fair head; against his broad breast lay hers; within his embrace was the form of the unknown an-

gelic being whom he had saved from a terrible death.

Steve Speed was overcome with feelings such as he had never before experienced.

He could hardly believe his senses. He seemed to have become another man, through the undreamed-of happiness of the moment.

All this was in an instant, as the young scout strode toward the *motte*; the sight of his horse, standing at the edge of the undergrowth, recalling him to the actual realities, and the duties of the moment.

Detaching his canteen from his saddle with one hand, he seated himself upon the sward, with Dora still in his arms, and gently bathed her head. Had not his anxiety and sympathy crushed down all other considerations, and inclinations, Steve would, doubtless, not have striven to hasten the recovery of his fair charge; as, in his heart, he feared that, upon returning to consciousness, she would merely thank him for the service he had rendered, and vanish forever from his sight and life.

Feelings, such as he had never before even dreamed of possessing, had somewhat demoralized the mind of the young scout; and, to end his misgivings and forebodings, he placed the canteen nozzle between the lips of the senseless girl, and allowed a tiny stream to run into her mouth.

Casting the vessel aside, Steve quickly clasped Dora's wrist, detecting a faint pulsation. Soon, the fair girl uttered a faint moan, and her face became stamped with horror; indicating that, with returning consciousness, her brain still retained the terrible picture last photographed upon it.

A shudder convulsed her fair form, and, in place of slowly opening her eyes, and gradually realizing the near past, all seemed to be recalled in an instant, except the last act in the tragic drama. With a piercing cry of horror, her eyes flashed open, her arms were thrown upward, and were clasped about the neck of her preserver.

Then, as suddenly realizing that she had been saved, she threw herself backward from the young scout, and gazed into his face, in the utmost bewilderment. Both were too much overcome to speak; but Steve, perceiving that his fair charge was in a most embarrassing position, quickly arose, as he exclaimed:

"Pardon me, miss! But you recovered so suddenly and unexpectedly, that you quite startled me. I am not much accustomed to the society of your sex, and was completely upset by your being in a faint."

The young man politely raised his sombrero, as he first addressed Dora; the latter, for a moment, gazing in some confusion into his handsome face, and then glancing at the dead steer, and the bay horse which stood near them.

That roving glance made all plain to the fair girl, and she became, at once, her own impulsive, innocent self.

Taking both hands of the young scout in hers, she returned, in words that were full of feeling.

"I cannot thank you, as I ought! You have preserved me from a horrible death, and I shall pray for you to my dying day."

"Oh, sir, I cannot express my gratitude in words! My father must know, and thank you. We must be friends always. Heaven has brought us together in a most strange manner, and one most fortunate for me."

"My name is Dora Dale, and I shall ever bear this eventful day in mind. Never, never shall I forget you, or cease to pray for your happiness!"

Rapidly and earnestly were these words spoken, while the emotions that prompted them were mirrored in her beautiful eyes. The scout replied:

"Prayers from your lips, Miss Dale, can scarce fail to be answered. But you overrate my slight service; and, please do not again thank me for an act which has given me more happiness, in a few brief moments, than I ever had dreamt of experiencing."

"I am but a rough scout of the plains, but I feel much more civilized, and have more respect for myself, since I have been enabled to render you a service. But I have not introduced myself. I am yours to command, Stephen Speed!"

He said this while clasping Dora's hands, and gazing into her face, which flushed, and her eyes dropped, at the unmistakable and ardent adoration which was betrayed by his glances. And little less apparent were her own emotions.

To say that she was surprised at meeting with one so noble, handsome, and brave—far above any whom she had ever before seen, as she mentally admitted—would be but faintly to express her feelings. She was not only astonished, but was proud and happy to owe her life to him.

"And, Mr. Speed, I am your most sincere friend, now and forever!" she returned, impulsively.

The young man quickly clasped her to his bosom, and imprinted a hasty kiss upon her brow. For his life he could not resist the impulse that caused him to be thus demonstrative; but the next instant he regretted it, and hastened to apologize, in his original and peculiar manner.

Springing from Dora's side to his horse, he exclaimed, as he bounded into his saddle:

"Forgive me, Miss Dora! But, really, I could not resist the temptation. I have been rude, and have more than canceled all your imagined indebtedness. I go now to lasso your horse, and lead the animal to you."

"Please remain in or near the *motte* until I return."

Waving his hand gracefully in a parting salutation, Steve drove spurs, and shot toward the bottom-timber; his heart cheered, and filled with joy unbounded, as Dora kissed her hand to him, without any manifestation of having been offended at the liberty he had so rashly taken.

CHAPTER III.

FROM ONE DANGER TO ANOTHER.

STEVE, the Scout, had scarce vanished from the view of Dora Dale when the latter regretted much that she had not prevented his departure; for she well knew that Nero had galloped to and forded the river, dashing, in his fright, into her father's camp.

The arrival of the mustang, she was aware, would cause a great excitement, and her father would be apprehensive in regard to her safety. From the appearance of the horse they would know that she was on the opposite side of the river from the camp, and a search would be at once instituted.

They would, doubtless, meet the young scout, who would explain matters; but they would insist upon accompanying Steve back to the *motte*.

This would prevent her from seeing the young man alone, for the present at least, which was far from pleasing to Dora; for after he had gone, she had thought of a hundred and one things to say and ask of him. And there was still another reason.

She feared that his services to her would not be appreciated by at least one person in her father's camp; indeed, more than this, that the individual of whom we shall hereafter speak might insult Steve, and thus cause serious trouble.

All in all, the maiden was ill at ease, especially as she had received a terrible shock, she having been torn from the very jaws of death in a horrible form, and her terror drowned in oblivion only to return to consciousness to be transformed into the utmost gratitude, and a longing admiration toward her rescuer.

It required but a short time, however, for Dora to come to a conclusion in regard to the nature of the emotions that ruled her, as she gazed after the fast galloping scout, who sat his horse like a centaur. These thoughts found expression in words.

"How handsome, how graceful he is! Oh! why did I allow him to leave?"

Dora Dale was forced to acknowledge to herself, without much effort or reasoning, that she had met one who was more, or would be more, than all others to her; in fact that she had met her fate.

Had Steve been less outspoken in regard to his own feelings which had pleased her greatly, it would have been all the same. She felt assured that she had been betrayed by look and act and speech, so greatly and favorably had she been impressed by him and his services. Consequently, his words could not be out of place, under the circumstances. Most certainly there had been little felt by either toward the other, that had been plainly revealed by word or look.

Since she had sprung from her mustang to pluck the flowers, although but little time had passed, events most startling and bewildering had occurred; and the half-dazed maiden pressed her hands to her forehead and then glanced back, with a shudder, at the huge brute that had so recently been plunging madly toward her, threatening her life.

A change had come upon her life in that brief time. A thick curtain seemed to have been torn from before her mind's eye, revealing brilliant possibilities in the future.

The birds seemed to sing more sweetly, the flowers appeared more brilliant, and threw out, on the morning air, a more agreeable perfume. But, each moment increased the uneasiness of Dora's mind, in regard to Steve's departure; her regret, that she had not prevented him from setting out, becoming doubled. Little did she dream that she would have still deeper cause for this regret.

She was soon to realize that the apprehensions and regrets she had entertained were as naught, compared with a peril which would cause her to pray, from her inmost soul, for the young scout's return, to rescue her from a fate far worse than being gored to death by the furious beast!

Dora seated herself in the margin of the bushes that bordered the *motte*. There she remained thinking, her mind filled with wonder at her strange emotions; reviewing the slightest glance and movement of her preserver, and slowly repeating to herself his words.

Had any one told her, an hour previous, that she would, under any circumstances, speak as

she had done to a stranger, she would have laughed in contradiction; considering the supposition worthy of no other reply. The near past seemed most strange and puzzling to the young girl, as she sat thus, buried in deep thought, and unmindful of strange sounds in her immediate vicinity.

It was then, that two ruffianly-looking men galloped headlong from the southwest, around the *motte*, to the side of the slain steer.

So amazed was the maiden, and so horrified by the terrible oaths they uttered, that she was powerless to move a muscle. She sat, with eyes fixed in dread apprehension, upon the most villainous-looking pair.

White men they were, but most brutal were their faces, which were heavily bearded, and with long tangled hair. Low-browed, and with black, treacherous, deep set eyes, they were brutish in look, and profane in words. Both were clad in ragged buckskin breeches, and tattered shirts; their sombreros being crushed, and smeared with grease. They were also armed, in the usual manner, with knives and revolvers.

Mounted upon half-wild mustangs, and their equipments of the most primitive kind, it was evident that these men were not honest rancheros, or herders.

Dora believed them to be lawless scoundrels, perhaps horse or cattle thieves.

"Wa-al, Satan t'ar an' torment ther cuss what shooted our steer!" burst out one, after a volley of profanity. "Lije, I 'lows, ef I gits half a show, ter chuck a ounce er two o' lead inter ther kiote's carkidge. Whar'n ther blazes d'yer s'pose he skuted tu?"

"Dash my dod-gasted heart, ef I hes ther leastest idee?" was the reply. "An' hit sorter knocks me blind ter form an opine what hit war did fer."

"Ther steer war shot plum through ther heart, an' we-uns must hack out ther bestest meat, an' skute lively, er some o' ther ranchers mought buck ag'in' us. Hit ain't a very healthy locate, hyeraways, fer we-uns, pard Bill!"

"Dog-gone ef yer ain't kerrect! Levant's ther word, I reckon. Slash out ther tongue, an' I'll go fer a chunk o' rump. Thar ain't no time ter skin ther critter. Cuss ther luck! Hyer we-uns hev chased this cussed black steer plenty o' times, without gittin' nigh him; and then, arter we hed roped him, an' slapped our boss brand onter him, dang me ef he didn't git ther best on us, an' skute with one of our lariats 'roun' his neck!"

"But we'd ha' hed him, an' run him cross ther Grandee, ef thet galoot—whoever he war—hedn't shooted him. Dang hit! What war ther reason he war shooted down?"

"Thar's bin a rumpus o' some sort hyer, Bill. Air yer gittin' blind. Thar's fresh boss-tracks a plain trail, p'intin' toward ther river."

"Reckon, we'd better skute, fer fear ther galoots mought p'int back. Hit looks kinder mixed. 'Pears es though ther steer went fer somebuddy, et stompede speed, an' they hed ter plug him, er git tossed; though I shu'd s'pose they mought ha' gut away wi' tharselves, bein' a-critter-back."

"Dang my heart, Bill! Jist gaze yunder! Ther sky's broke loose, an' a angel hev dropped, er I air a dod-gasted liar!"

The pair, as they had conversed, had been engaged in cutting from the carcass of the steer such portions as had been suggested by Bill; and Lije was just securing the tongue of the animal to the cantle of his saddle, when, upon glancing over the same, he caught sight of the affrighted Dora, who, pale with dread, sat in the same position, gazing in terror toward the ruffians, whose words had proved that her conclusions in regard to their character had been correct.

So startled and astonished was Lije, that he dropped the beef's tongue to the ground, and stood, pointing, as he spoke, over the saddle, toward the poor terrified maiden.

The words of the villain, and his gloating glance, broke the spell that had bound Dora, and she sprung to her feet, and ran shrieking in the direction of the river; but the rank grass and flowers impeded her progress, her feet became entangled in creeping vines, and she fell to the earth.

"Ketch her, pard Lije! Ketch her er we're goners, dead sure! Cuss ther luck, she screeches woss nor a hungry painter, an' she'll fotch ther ranchers, er somebuddy woss, down onter we-uns!"

Lije had not stopped to pick up the tongue, but sprung around his horse, and bounded after Dora, at the moment that the latter had started to run; Bill remaining to hold the mustangs.

When the poor girl fell, the ruffian was close upon her, and any further attempt to escape from her pursuer was useless.

Clutching the horrified maiden in his rough grasp, Lije clapped his filthy hand, now smeared with the blood of the steer, over the mouth of his captive, thus preventing her last hopeless shriek from being heard.

Dora, overcome with disgust, fear, horror and despair, again lay limp and senseless in the arms of a man who was an entire stranger, but just the opposite, in character and appearance,

of the one who had such a short time ago clasped her to his breast.

Certainly it had proved to be an eventful morning to poor Dora Dale!

"Grab a bolt on her, Bill!" ordered Lije, quickly, again gazing toward the river.

"I shut off her yelp, an' she wilted dead away. She hed p'inted fer ther big timmer, an' thar's whar she's spectin' sombuddy ter glide from."

"We must skute lively. I doesn't hanker arter sich stock, but she'll fotch more ducats over ther Grandee than a hull herd o' steers."

"Cuss me, ef we-uns hain't struck a raise, er I'm a lunk-headed liar!"

"Satan tortur' me ef we hesn't, Lije! Jump yer critter, an' I'll toss her up ter yer. She's a high-fly piece o' domestic—dog-gone me ef she ain't!—an' purty es a pictur'."

"I begins ter undercomstan' ther hull biz. Ther steer stompede et ther gal, an' her nag slung her off an' levanted; then some galoot plugged ther beef, reskied her, an' skuted arter her boss. He'll be hyer afore soon."

"Git, pard—git! I'm arter yer hot an' heavy, yer kin bet yer bottom dollar."

"Glide s'uth'ard, an' we'll strike ther thick timmer down below!"

As the words of the speaker indicate, he had passed the senseless form of the young girl up to the arms of Lije, after the latter had again mounted his mustang.

Lije spurred headlong in a southerly direction, keeping the *mottes* between him and the course from the dead steer to the river, Bill mounting and galloping after him at full speed.

From the appearance of these two ruffians upon the scene until their flight with their fair captive, but a few minutes had elapsed; and Dora Dale was being borne away at terrific speed long before any one appeared from the bottom-timber of the Guadalupe.

One word from the maiden would have caused Steve, the scout, to abandon his self-imposed mission in search of her mustang, but that word had not been spoken.

Upon such slight omissions and seemingly trifling occurrences, how often does happiness or even life depend!

But, had the young man remained, our story would never have been written.

CHAPTER IV.

A RIVAL IN THE CAMP.

EXPERIENCING a new-born happiness, Steve Speed galloped toward the shades of the timber that marked the course of the Rio Guadalupe, something less than half a mile from the point at which he had so providentially arrived, at the very instant which enabled him to rescue a lovely girl from a horrible death, and which had culminated in causing such a great change to come over the spirit of his dreams.

That this day was the day of all days for him, during his sojourn on earth, Steve was convinced; also that he had met the maiden of all maidens to him—one who would rule his destiny, his heart, his very soul!

Filled with love and admiration for the fair unknown at first sight, even before he had glanced over the sights of his rifle, his whole being had been drawn toward Dora upon clasping her unconscious form in his arms; and, when he had gazed into the limpid eyes, so filled with gratitude and admiration—these emotions being revealed so plainly by the innocent, trusting, and impulsive girl—then he had realized what she must henceforth be to him, if life was to be worth living. Clearly, with both, it had been love at first sight.

He had feared that he had offended her by his having obeyed an irresistible impulse to press a kiss upon her brow, and dreading above all else a look or word of rebuke or scorn from her, he had sprung to the side of his horse, to avoid such, then into his saddle, and on toward the river; all his fears and doubts vanishing, however, as the fair maiden tossed a kiss from her finger-tips toward him.

This act caused him to regret having thus abruptly broken his interview with Dora, and he very nearly resolved to return, and claim the privilege of bearing her in his arms before him in the saddle to the river.

It was not a long time before he deeply regretted not having obeyed that impulse.

At the time, however, he reasoned that when he returned with Dora's mustang, he would have ample opportunity to speak the many words that he wished to say, and to make some arrangements as to their meeting each other in the future.

Steve vowed that he would meet Dora Dale again, at any and all hazards.

They had as yet had no time to speak of each other's affairs. He knew nothing, even in regard to the circumstances surrounding Dora.

She had spoken of her father, and his camp, but not at any length, and she had said nothing explanatory of its location, or of his business.

That she belonged to a family of refinement and intelligence, Steve was positive; but this gave him no satisfaction—just the opposite, indeed, for he felt doubts and fears in this re-

spect, and wished, from the bottom of his heart, that she was of a lower stratum in society from that which he felt, from her attire and speech, she occupied.

A wandering scout like himself, with but little money, and less expectations, would have but little chance of gaining a bride of aristocratic family and wealth. Indeed, Steve had always held money in something like scorn, caring only for what was necessary to supply his wants.

But a change had come over him, and he was fated to realize that love brings with it many torturing emotions, creating doubts and fears almost insupportable, when the object of that love is in danger.

In fact, Steve Speed, the prairie roamer, up to this time free and fearless of the future as the soaring eagle, was fated, during one short day, to experience such emotions as he had hitherto laughed at.

But as he galloped toward the timber of the Guadalupe, he had no warning of what was before him.

As unconscious of the misery that was to follow from his having met with Dora Dale as he had been a short hour previous of that meeting, on galloped Steve Speed, easily trailing the mustang of the young girl, as the animal had kept the cow-path, where every fresh hoof-print was clearly defined.

Soon the heavy timber was reached, the trail leading through the bottom to the river, the same being cleared of trees and undergrowth; this fact proving that the stream was fordable at that point.

Through the ford the young scout proceeded, and then urged his gallant bay up the bank on the north side of the river and along the trail which continued through the timber. A short gallop brought him within view of a wagon camp on the outer border of the line of towering trees. Beyond the clear space, within which was the camp, was a crescent of mesquites, which hid the wagons from view.

Steve's keen eyes moved around the camp, which had, in so short a time, become of deep interest to him.

There were a dozen wagons, with white canvas tilts, which had apparently seen little service.

Groups of men, women and children were around the camp-fires: some preparing the morning meal, others watching, with evidently keen appetites, those who were thus engaged. The mules were, doubtless, beyond the mesquites grazing; and from this fact, at such an hour, Steve would have at once known that he who controlled the train was not accustomed to this kind of traveling. The camp should have been broken, and the train miles away, thus avoiding the intense heat of mid-day, which should be passed in a sheltered place.

All this, the young scout saw at a glance, and then he perceived a trio of horsemen coming at full speed from the west side of the camp.

Steve saw that these men had, in lead, the mustang of Dora Dale, and that they were much excited, one of them giving explanations in a loud voice.

Instantly all was confusion in the camp.

Steve had discovered that the mustang had left the cart-trail near the river, and dashed into the timber, and he now knew that it had made its way through the undergrowth, emerging from it at the western side of the camp, and but recently.

It was certain that these three men were now starting in search of Dora; and also, that they were both amazed and concerned at the return of the horse.

Little time had he, however, for thought; the approaching riders were now gazing at the young scout in astonishment, not unmixed with suspicion.

One of them was a man of soldierly appearance and bearing; of sinewy form, although somewhat spare of flesh. He bore the marks of trouble and anxiety.

His hair was long and gray, and his eyes blue and keen, although judging from appearance, he must have been near three-score and ten.

Steve at once decided that this was the father of the maiden whom he had rescued, and the young man was favorably impressed, even at that distance.

This was not the case, however, as regards the one who rode next him; for, at the first glance, the scout knew that he was looking upon a cowardly, selfish, and unprincipled man. More than this, he felt convinced, though he could not have explained why or wherefore, that this dark-visaged, foppish-looking person was destined to be connected with his life and hopes in no favorable or pleasant manner.

He was attired in rich and fashionable garments, including a shirt of immaculate linen, and a hunting-jacket of blue-black velvet. A 'biled' shirt, at that time, was seldom seen, even in the towns of West Texas.

A black goatee and mustache, which were carefully dressed and pointed, gave this personage a Frenchy look, which his complexion added to.

His hair was worn long, but was straight and coarse.

The third horseman was a roughly appareled teamster.

As they galloped to the point where the young scout sat his horse in waiting, the latter politely touched the brim of his sombrero, in salutation.

All halted suddenly gazing at Steve in some surprise; the foreign-looking individual, with a decidedly supercilious stare.

The scout took not the slightest notice of this man, but addressed himself to the elderly gentleman.

"I believe I have the honor of speaking to Mr Dale?" he said, with an inquiring expression of face.

"Mister Dale?" said the dark-faced stranger, sneeringly, not giving time for that gentleman to reply; "if you would like to know this person's business"—turning to the old gentleman—"I'll introduce you. This, sir,"—to Steve—"is Major Duncan Dale, a planter, and who is well known in Texas."

"Now, who are you, and what is your business?"

"My business is not with you, sir; at least, not at present, however it may be recorded that our affairs are to be somewhat mixed hereafter."

"But, as to that, I do not know, neither do I care."

This was said in a tone that smacked slightly of contempt, and in the most off-hand manner.

The swarthy face became darker, and the black eyes fairly snapped, seeming to emit sparks of fire.

Steve, however, took not the slightest notice of this, but again spoke to the old planter.

"I beg your pardon, Major Dale," he said, in an apologetic manner, "for having failed, through ignorance, to address you correctly. However, titles amount to but little in this part of Texas."

"I am anxious, major, to relieve your mind in regard to your daughter, so I will at once announce the fact that I came to your camp in search of Miss Dale's runaway horse."

"You have? Oh, thank you!" exclaimed the old man with much feeling. "Where is my child, and how came she to be thrown from her mustang?"

Upon the first mention of Dora's name by the young scout, jealous fury shot from the black eyes of the gloomy-visaged stranger, and his teeth fairly ground with the intensity of his fiendish emotions.

The teamster was looking earnestly at Steve, as if striving to recall where he had seen him.

"Major Dale, your daughter is safe and unharmed. She is waiting for her horse, about a half-mile from the river, on the opposite side from this point."

"She had dismounted to pluck some flowers, and the mustang ran to camp."

"You have relieved my mind greatly," said the major. "To whom do I owe my thanks for this kind attention to my daughter?"

"If it is my name you wish to know, Major Dale, it is Stephen Speed, at your service."

"Happy to form your acquaintance, Mr. Speed," said the old gentleman warmly, as he spurred his horse forward and extended his hand, which was grasped by the young man in a hearty shake.

Then the major, in a somewhat embarrassed manner, turned to his swarthy companion, saying:

"Allow me to make you acquainted with my friend, Count Biron Broquier, Mr. Speed. Mr. Speed, Count Broquier!"

Steve merely glanced toward the count, and nodded his head carelessly, even this slight acknowledgment of the introduction being accorded him entirely out of consideration for the old major.

The latter gazed at the count in the utmost wonder, having caught sight of the fiendishly-contorted countenance of his companion.

"Your friend, the count, appears to be unwell. I should judge that he had a touch of the cholera, by his appearance. Perhaps it would be better for him to remain in camp, while we hasten to relieve Miss Dale from her lonely position."

Thus spoke Stampede Steve.

It was evident to the young man, as he glanced out of the corner of his eye at the count, that the latter was only enabled to control his rage by a most powerful effort of the will.

In a scornful manner he asked:

"Are you a physician, sir, that you thus diagnose a man's case by a mere glance into his face?"

The young scout made no reply, but dashed along by the side of the major, who had purposely spurred forward as he seemed to fear that the count would further insult Steve.

"I beg, Mr. Speed, that you will not mind my friend," said Major Dale, in a low tone. "He is not accustomed to Texas ways, having but recently arrived from New Orleans. Besides, I may say, he is naturally of a morose disposition."

"I beg leave to remark," returned the young scout, "that had it not been for my respect for you, major, I should have taken the stiffness out of his mustache and goatee, if nothing more; and I am very confident that, if he does

not draw in his horns, figuratively speaking, in the way of looks and lip, I shall be under the painful necessity of putting him to soak in some convenient bog-hole, and perhaps may have to perforate his carcass a little, previous to the immersion."

The major stared into the face of the young man, in a pleading manner, and with some slight gesture of caution.

It was clear that the old gentleman feared anything in the shape of an unpleasantness, and was desirous, above all things, to conciliate his ill-favored guest.

CHAPTER VI.

A TITLED ADVENTURER.

It had been plainly evident to both Steve Speed and Major Dale, that Count Broquier had begun to see that he had met a far different person in the young scout, from what he had supposed.

His insulting words and looks had been met with utter disdain; in fact, they had seemed to amuse, rather than irritate the young man, and this maddened the count almost beyond endurance.

Yet, he was forced to "grin and bear it;" his grin, however, being more like the vengeful expression of a murderous Apache brave, than aught else.

The teamster, Bob Barr, although chiefly interested in inspecting the young scout, had at last detected the manifestations of enmity that were so plainly shown by the count toward him.

Various were the thoughts which flashed through the mind of our hero, in regard to the so-called count, and conclusions as quickly were formed, based upon the words and manner of the man in question. As at his first glance, Steve decided that the swarthy individual was a deceptive and unprincipled villain; and he was not a little surprised at meeting such a questionable character, in the company, and as the avowed friend of Dora Dale's father.

This surprise and wonder became still stronger, after hearing the count speak, and show his ungentlemanly character so plainly.

It was beyond the power of Steve's comprehension, how such an intelligent, and evidently honorable man as Major Dale could fail to detect the real character of the man, with whom he appeared to be intimately associated.

The count could be read like a book. His very life was imprinted upon his face; and only to look upon it created strong aversion. Then his words were in consonance with his looks. Steve decided at once, that the man was not what he pretended to be. The name of Count Biron Broquier, he felt, was assumed.

There was a mystery connected with the acquaintance and apparent friendship between this man and Major Dale. That was very apparent.

The major had shown evidences, and strong ones at that, that he did not wish Steve to notice the insulting words and manner of the count.

Indeed, it almost appeared that the old man stood in fear of his swarthy associate; that the latter had some power over him.

Reasoning upon all that he had observed, the young scout had arrived at the following conclusions:

First, that the self-styled count was simply a disreputable scamp, who had, in some underhanded manner, gotten the major in his power.

Secondly, that the count proposed to use all his power and influence upon Major Dale, for a certain purpose. This purpose, or object, was plain to the young man, and was of deep interest to him; so deep, indeed, that it caused Steve the utmost indignation, when he made up his mind as to the character of the same.

Stephen Speed knew nothing of the pecuniary affairs of Major Dale; but appearances indicated that the old planter was well off in this world's goods.

The major was wealthy, and had an only child.

The object of the count was plain; it was to marry Dora Dale, and thus get possession of the wealth of the old major.

Perhaps he, in his way, loved Dora, and had determined, if no other way promised success, that he would plot to place the father in such a position that he would be ruined, did he not sacrifice his daughter. Steve believed that the count had already to a certain extent, proceeded in carrying out this plot. Possibly this removal to the West was included in the villainous plan toward the accomplishment of this man's object.

The young scout, who had, in the early morning, been free and independent, with neither care nor concern for his own future, or that of others, found himself now so mixed up in a labyrinth of other people's affairs, that he was quite astounded.

But it required only a little reflection to decide as to his future course.

He loved Dora Dale.

He would, never again, lose sight of her.

He had saved her from death, and he would now prevent her from being sacrificed to this

infamous scoundrel, whom he believed to be a slimy, poisonous snake, whose head should be crushed.

Stephen Speed made a mental vow that he would crush the snake himself.

It caused a shudder of horror, to even think of the possibility of Dora's being linked for life to such a cowardly cur as this self-styled count. But, first, he must find out the nature of the influence which he seemed to exercise over the old major.

Once this was done, he believed that all would be plain sailing. He would, therefore, now set out to "trail" the count.

If he could win Dora Dale, the young scout felt that he would be the happiest man on earth.

Thus it will be seen that our young friend found ample food for thought; but, as has been mentioned, it occupied only a few fitting moments for him to form his deductions as to the state of affairs with those whom he had so suddenly and unexpectedly become associated.

The count rode in the rear with the teamster, in sullen silence, a fact which proved plainly that he had been cowed by the manner and words of Steve.

He was one of those insolent beings who assume the airs of one who seeks a difficulty, and cares not for the consequences; but this was all bravado.

However, Stampede Steve would never have gained the reputation of a skilled scout, had he not been gifted with keen perception; and he well knew that the brain of the count had been as busy as his own—that the swarthy villain was plotting against him, and would, at any favorable time, assassinate him without hesitation, if his own life was not in danger from such an attempt.

Count Biron Broquier was an unscrupulous villain—so the scout decided—but the latter rather enjoyed the situation in which he found himself. He would give the swarthy scoundrel "plenty of rope," and, without doubt, the count would hang himself, figuratively speaking, in a little time.

Major Dale seemed to be troubled in mind by the conduct of his gloomy-looking friend, and the possibility of the latter and the young Texan becoming engaged in a personal encounter.

Even Dora was for the time forgotten.

The major, however, was not aware of the danger from which his daughter had escaped. But at length he aroused himself and asked:

"What were the circumstances, Mr. Speed, connected with your meeting my daughter? Were you traveling up the river, on the south side?"

"No, major; I was going down-stream. The mustang had run quite a distance before I discovered your daughter. Have you been long encamped at this ford, may I ask?"

"We have been here since yesterday at noon. The mules needed rest, and I thought it best to remain for a day or two. Do you reside in this vicinity?"

The scout laughed merrily, as he answered:

"I have no particular local habitation, major. I am a prairie roamer—ranger, scout, and guide."

"Indeed! Why, it is quite fortunate that we met—that is, if you are open for an engagement. I wish to secure a guide—one who is well acquainted with the lay of the land on the Leona, a branch of the Rio Frio. Have you ever scouted in that direction?"

"Very frequently, major."

Steve could hardly express his gratification.

Here was an opening, which promised him the extreme pleasure of being near to, in fact in the company of, Dora Dale. He was thankful that the count was too far in the rear, to distinguish the words of the old planter.

Did that swarthy villain know of the major's intention to engage Steve as guide, he might, did his power extend that far, prevent the old gentleman from making any such arrangement.

He made no immediate reply; and, at length, Major Dale again inquired:

"Are you at liberty at present, Mr. Speed?"

"I am, sir!"

"And willing to guide my train?"

"Certainly, major; but, I give you fair warning that the Indians are in the habit of raiding along the Rio Frio and the Leona."

"I apprehend no danger from the red-men," was the response; "all I ask, is time to erect strong log dwellings. I have men enough with me to defend our proposed settlement. They are all well armed, and I have abundance of ammunition. I have decided to invest in the stock business, but shall not purchase any breed cattle until we are well settled."

"Then you are determined to locate on the Leona?"

"That is my objective point, Mr. Speed. I have reliable information in regard to its being an excellent grazing section. Is that the case?"

"It is; except in times of great drought, when stock would have to be driven to the northwestward, or die. However, it has now been several years since there has been a protracted dry term."

"Then, as you are at liberty, and willing to

engage as guide for me, we will, from this on, consider you as one of our family.

"We need not for the present, speak of the pecuniary part of the arrangement. I want you, and what it costs is of no consequence to me."

"Money matters are of little moment to myself, Major Dale. I do not trouble myself very much with money, or the thoughts of it. I am to consider myself in your employ, and that ends it."

"I apprehend, however, that Count Broquier will not be particularly pleased at your having engaged me."

An uneasy expression came into the major's face, and he glanced behind him, as he replied:

"I declare, I entirely forgot him! You and the count seem to have formed an antipathy to each other at sight. I do not understand it."

"Major Dale," said the young man, gazing steadily at the planter, "I do not think it ought to be beyond your understanding. The character of this noble personage, whom I find in your company, is stamped plainly upon his face."

"He knew that I read him at a glance, and hence his hatred of myself."

"It is not my business to know or care, why he is with you; but I venture to assert that you will yet curse the day you permitted him to grasp your hand in friendship!"

"Mark my words, Major Dale; I am to go with your train, and I avow that my great object will be to defeat that villain, and defend you from his designs—I can see through him, and it is a mystery to me, that I find him in your company."

"Do not tax yourself to reply; but bear in mind that I am your friend, and will yet sever the knot that binds you and yours to Count Biron Broquier!"

The old gentleman had a most bewildered look while the scout was speaking; but, as Steve ended his remarks, he asked, in a hoarse voice:

"Are you a magician, Mr. Speed? You amaze, astonish me! What can you mean?"

"It requires only the most ordinary perception to arrive at the conclusion I have formed," said the young man. "But, we are approaching the spot where I left your daughter—among those oaks."

With these words, the scout galloped forward. The maiden, he had rescued, was nowhere to be seen!

Directly up to the dead steer plunged the horse of Steve; the latter at once discovering that the slain animal had been hacked, and the tongue cut out.

Instantly the young scout recognized the fact, that the pursuers of the steer had been to the carcass.

Where were they?

Who were they?

Where was Dora?

Peering into the shades, Steve Speed called out wildly, the missing girl's name.

As may be supposed, Major Dale was startled at this discovery. He galloped up to the scout, the count and the teamster close in the rear.

Soon Steve recovered himself, and springing from his horse, he began reading the "sign" at, and around the carcass.

"By my hopes of Heaven, I'll save her! I'll tear her from the villains, and hush them into saddle-strings! I swear it; I'll rescue Dora Dale!"

A mocking, triumphant laugh sounded on the air, followed by an ejaculation of jealous fury. Steve, the Scout, realized his imprudence.

The laugh came from Count Biron Broquier. Another followed from the same source, but it was quickly smothered.

How!

By the blood-reeking tongue of the dead steer, which struck the count directly, and with great force, across the mouth and face!

Major Dale, and Bob Barr, the teamster, stood, silent and dumfounded.

The tongue had been hurled, in fury, but with deliberation, by Steve, the Scout!

CHAPTER VI.

A RECOGNITION.

At the very instant that the young scout hurled the blood-smeared tongue in the face of the count, he jerked his revolver, and presented it at the swarthy insulter, yelling out:

"Up with your hands, Count Broquier, or I'll let the black blood out of your vile heart! Up hands, I say, or I'll bore you!"

The count, with a fierce curse, had attempted when struck to draw his pistol; but the words of Steve were too plain and emphatic to be disobeyed. His hands went up, on the instant, while his dark face turned ashen in hue.

"Hold, Mr. Speed!" exclaimed the major; "would you shoot the man, and for what? Where, in Heaven's name, is my daughter? What does all this mean?"

Digging his spurs, the count forced his horse to bound forward, placing the major between him and the scout. Then he yelled:

"It is a very cunning plot, Major Dale! Are you blind? That ruffian and his fellows have abducted Miss Dale. He is an outlaw!"

No sooner had he uttered these words, than

the count lowered his hands, clutched his bridle, drove spurs, and dashed toward the river; but as he turned to enter the cow-path, the crack of a revolver sounded, and Count Biron Broquier, together with his horse, fell to the earth.

"What does all this mean?" cried out the old major. "Have you killed the count?"

The young scout stood erect, his eyes blazing with fury. He gazed neither to the right nor left. He seemed not to hear the major's words.

A change, at once, came over the old planter. Straightening himself, he drew his revolver, and leveled it directly at Steve's breast; saying, in a determined voice:

"Explain your words and acts, Mr. Speed, at once! Where is my daughter?"

"Have you shot the count for having exposed your true character? Speak! I demand an explanation, and that at the muzzle of my revolver! I have the drop on you!"

The teamster, who had been dumfounded at these strange and rapidly changing occurrences, but who had shown signs of pleasure on hearing, for the first time, the prairie cognomen of the young scout, now spurred forward, and extended his hand, saying:

"Put her thar, pard! Why didn't yer say yer war Stampede Steve afore? Dog-goned ef I didn't know, dead sure, I'd see'd yer somewhere, but I c'dn't 'zactly tell whar!"

"Put up yer shooter, major! This hyer air ther squarest, whitest perrarer pilgrim yer ever run ag'in'. I'm a bettin' on bit!"

"Steve, I'm know'd es Bob Barr. I useter drive on ther Pass route, fer George Giddin's. Reckon yer mought ha' heerd tell o' my bein' ther only cuss what 'scaped ther 'Paches, outen a hull hearse full, 'bove Fort Clark, 'last year?"

Steve mechanically took the proffered hand, and replied in a friendly tone:

"Thank you, Bob, for your recommend! Yes, I know of you, and that you are true blue."

"But stand aside! I am not afraid of a brave man, but only of a coward, like the count yonder."

Bob urged his horse forward, but there stood the major, his revolver still leveled at the scout's breast; although his eyes were fixed upon the teamster in no little surprise and wonder.

"Major Dale," said Steve, in a ringing but friendly voice, as he folded his arms and gazed fixedly into the face of the old planter; "listen to me a moment! I have but little time to spare, for I have sworn to rescue your daughter!"

"It is not strange that you are puzzled and almost beside yourself with anguish. Neither is it to be wondered at that you are suspicious when you find that Miss Dale is not at the place where I asserted that I had left her."

"But it is strange, after I have spoken as I have to you in regard to that self-styled count, that you should place any confidence in his words."

"I have not killed the scoundrel, but I expect to be forced to do so in the near future. He is a veritable snake in the grass, and is now in an appropriate position. I will wager anything you may wish to stake that he is listening now to every word I speak."

"He does not dare rise from the ground, lest my next shot be aimed at his heart. But he is safe until I unmask his villainy and expose his true character to you."

"Bob Barr has said in your hearing that he knows me as an honorable man. I believe I bear that reputation through West Texas, and I have some celebrity as a not unskilled scout. Yet you accuse me of being a murderer, and of defaming one who you know in your heart cannot be defamed; who is so low and dastardly that no words can explain or define the depths of his infamous and vile character."

"But we have had enough of this. He is not worthy of so many words. Now, I will explain what seems so strange to you."

"I told you that Miss Dale's horse ran away from her. That was true; but the animal had been frightened by the maddened steer which you see dead before you. I put a bullet through that beast's heart, just in the nick of time to save your daughter's life. She fell senseless between the horns of the brute as it sunk at her feet."

"I carried her to the *motte*, and when she revived, sprung upon my horse to go in search of hers, bidding her remain here until my return."

"I trailed the horse to a point near your camp, and meeting you with the animal, returned with you, to find your daughter gone."

"Since I have been absent, the captors of the steer have been here. I perceive that they recovered their lasso, and then cut out the tongue and some meat to convey away. At the moment they were about to start it is evident that they must have discovered Miss Dale, and, dropping the tongue, hastened to take her captive."

"There is no ranchero in this region, who uses a brand like the one upon this steer."

"Such a brand is not recorded, I'll bet my life! There were two men here, and they were cattle-thieves, outlaws, and have carried your daughter away!"

"If I do not trail them, and rescue her within three days' time, she is lost forever!"

"She will be carried across the Rio Grande, to a doom far worse than death."

"Major Dale, if you will examine the steer and the trail, they will prove my assertions. I go now, to rescue Miss Dora, or die in the attempt."

"If you ever see me again, you will see your daughter also."

Clutching the neck-ropes of his horse, Steve nodded familiarly to Bob, and rode off rapidly on the trail of the abductors of Dora.

The old planter stood silent, almost overcome with mingled shame and self-condemnation.

Very impressive had been the attitude of the young scout. None, who heard and saw him, could doubt the truth of what he said.

At last, with an effort, the major called out:

"Hold, Mr. Speed! Hold!"

The scout halted, but reluctantly.

The old man rushed to his side, and grasped his hand, calling out, wildly:

"Forgive me, Mr. Speed! I was, and am, nearly insane with anguish and apprehension. In Heaven's name, what am I to do? It is I, and my men, who should follow those miscreants."

"If you will guide us on the trail, you shall have any reward you ask. I am convinced that you are an honest, and a brave man."

Grasping the proffered hand, Steve replied:

"Major Dale, I hold no ill-feelings against you. God knows you have had enough to unbalance your mind. I go on this trail, but not for pay; and I go alone. Others would not only impede my movements, but would render a rescue more doubtful."

"Silent and stealthy, Indian-like, I shall follow the villains, and save your child. Have no fears regarding my success, and do not detain me further. Bob would have volunteered, did he not know that I am better alone. Trust me, Major Dale!"

"Return to camp, and beware of Count Biron Broquier. Farewell! I shall return with your daughter—you may depend upon me!"

Without waiting a reply from the old planter, Steve Speed dashed on, along the trail.

The major staggered like a drunken man, his eyes blinded by tears, as he returned to the carcass of the steer. Bob Barr, having dismounted to examine the dead brute, exclaimed:

"Major, come hyer, an' yer kin see 'sign,' what talks es plain es Stampede Steve. I knowed every word he slung war Gospill truth, but I wanted yer ter see ther proofs."

"Thar's whar Steve's lead bored ther bleed-box o' ther critter, an' hyer's whar Miss Dora stood pickin' posies. Then yer kin see ther buff-prints o' ther ornary scum what levanted with her, an' whar they slashed off ther meat. Ther sign, all roun', air plain es A, B, C."

"Dang ef I doesn't feel fer yer, major! But I'm afferdavvin' thet Steve'll fotch ther leetle gal in, all XXX an' peart. I wouldn't be in ther skin o' ther bellyuns what's tuck her fer ther hull o' Texas. Stampede Steve air a ragin' roarer when he gits good an' mad, bet yer bestest team o' mules! He's thet-a-way 'bout now, I reckon."

"Yer see'd him when he slung ther tongue et ther count, who air 'bout es snaky es a Greaser—dang me ef he ain't!—an' long ee I'm with yer outfit he's gut ter keep his jaw hobbled, er I'll take ther stiffenin' outen him, es Steve did!"

"Whar in ther dickens air he? I reckon he's 'shamed ter show up. But thet can't be so; he's gut more cheek nor a he rhinoser-hoss."

"Major, don't worritate yerself. Hit'll all come out hunk with Miss Dora. Ef I warn't dead sure on hit, I'd skute on ther trail myself. But I knows Steve'll git away with ther bellyuns."

Major Dale had, by this time, seen plainly the proofs of the words of Stampede Steve.

He also perceived the horse of the count quietly feeding, and was surprised at the sight.

The words of the teamster gave him much hope and comfort.

But where was the count?

Why had the old planter spoken as he did to Steve, in regard to shooting this man?

It was because he had seen the head of Broquier peering above the grass, and he knew that the latter was not only unharmed but listening.

Had the count been killed, would Major Dale have regretted the fact?

He would not!

Why, then, did he fear to have the young scout resent the words of the insulting scoundrel, or fight him, when it was plain that he stood in fear and dread of his strange guest?

Was it because the count might not be slain outright, and, while dying, might reveal that which the old planter feared to have known—that, namely, which had placed him in the power of Broquier?

We shall see hereafter.

Bob Barr and the major proceeded at once toward the count's horse.

The grass was much trampled.

A little stream of blood flowed from a bullet-hole in the muscular portion of the horse's neck, near the roots of the mane. The rider was nowhere to be seen.

Both Major Dale and the teamster called to the count in loud voices.

There was no response.

Bob pointed to a clearly-defined trail through the tall grass, which had the appearance of having been made by a man creeping on all-fours.

This trail pointed down the river, parallel with the same.

Count Biron Broquier was gone!

Both the old planter and Bob turned about, and gazed toward the south.

Afar off, at times, they caught a view of Steve, the Scout, between the gigantic oaks.

He was following the trail, rapidly.

And that trail also led down the river, and parallel with it.

"Skute back ter camp, major, an' 'tend ter things! Thar's nasty biz ahead, an' Bob Barr's goin' ter prospect arter crookedness, on ther sly."

Before Major Dale could find tongue, in his demoralized state, to remonstrate, or ask an explanation, the teamster was galloping east, down-stream, and had soon disappeared in a dense *motte*.

With a groan of despair and anguish, the old man dashed along the cow-path, toward the ford, and his camp, leading the horse of the missing Count Biron Broquier.

CHAPTER VII.

RIDING TO THE RIO GRANDE.

THE two miscreants, who had abducted poor Dora Dale, felt convinced that their trail would soon be followed.

They rode side by side, at a gallop, after reaching, as they considered, a safe distance from the spot where they had captured the maiden. Then they turned eastward, keeping about the middle of the oak belt, and traveling parallel with the Rio Guadalupe.

Lije, as soon as a favorable point was reached with the assistance of Bill, bound and gagged the senseless girl; knowing that a scream from her might be the means of condemning them to death, at the end of a lariat.

"Dang my hide, Bill, ef we-uns hain't gut a good call ter keep shady, arter this hyer scrape? Whar'n ther devil, shell we p'int fer?"

"Satan tortur' me, Lije, ef yer ain't kerrect! We can't leave timber—the air a dead sure thing—er we'll git skuped in; thet air, ontill dark comes. Et night we kin glide Grandee-ways, strikin' ther San Antone river, an' lay over thar ter-morrer. Et I ain't mistooken, thar's ranchers, er somebuddy else, foun' et she's tuck, by this time."

"Spur up, then! We'll keep straight ahead fer a few mile, an' then strike fer ther big timber o' ther Guadalupe."

"We must 'low our critters free range, an' run chances then."

"Nary time, es long es Lasso Lije hes any sense left! We'll hobble ther nags in some 'open', 'mong ther underbrush, an' then climb up, with ther gal, some distance from ther critters."

"Thar's moss an' vines, thick enough ter hide a cotton-tailed rabbit; an' thet's ther sort of a spot whar we must locate purty soon."

"Dang ef yer head ain't level es usual, Lije! Thet's ther p'ogramme, dead sure. I 'lows ter take my bags up with me, fer I'm hungry es a b'ar!"

"Gut any whisk' left, Billy?"

"'Bout half a bottle. An' thet 'minds me, I'm dead sot fer a drink. My teeth air all on edge with hankerin' fer somethin'. Glad yer spoke of hit. Hyer, take a snifter!"

Bill passed the bottle to his pard, who drank, after proposing, as an appropriate sentiment:

"Hyer's hopin' we'll make a heap outen this ventur'! I opine we'll cl'ar a pile, ef we gits ther gal 'cross ther Grandee."

Bill echoed this, continuing, as he replaced the bottle in his saddle-bags:

"Ye're mighty right, pard; an' hit's 'bout time we-uns scooped in some rhino, an' hed a show ter buck et monte. This hyer gal air jist ther card fer some high-fly Castilian cuss, with plenty o' rocks; an' we'll strike him, yer bet!"

"No more chin!" cautioned Lije: "come on! We musn't fergit thet thar's mos' likely some howlin' mad cusses on our trail. Keep a flyin', an' gi'n yer peepers a extry job o' gazin' ahead!"

Both spurred deep, and with snorts of pain, the horses bounded headlong amid the oaks; poor Dora soon recovering her consciousness, to be terrified and tortured with dread despair, at finding herself in the power of the repulsive-looking ruffians, bound and gagged, and being borne, she knew not whither.

She strove to shriek, to give vent to the anguish, and misery, and horror, that ruled her; but, only a choking, gurgling sound escaped her.

The poor girl gave herself up for lost.

She knew not where she was, in what direction she was being conveyed, or what length of time had passed since she had been captured.

The near past had at once, been brought very

plainly and forcibly to mind, upon her having first regained consciousness.

The form and face of Stephen Speed had been indelibly imprinted upon her mind; his words echoed in her ears, and her heart overflowed with love and gratitude to him. She was confident that the young scout would do all in his power toward her rescue; but, deeply she regretted that she had not called him back.

She felt that Stephen would blame himself for having left her alone, but this would spur him on to her rescue; he would follow the trail, regardless of any other consideration.

Then she began to feel anxious in regard to the reception the scout would, in all probability, receive at her father's camp.

The latter, she knew, would be grateful to him beyond measure; but there was one at the camp, the mere thought of whom made her shudder, who would be anything but pleased when he knew that this handsome young man had earned her friendship and gratitude.

Then came the bitterest thought of all. When Stephen should guide her father and others to the *motte*, expecting to meet her, and she not there!

They might think the young stranger in league with the abductors; ay, the prime mover in the plot. From the fact that he had gone to the camp after her horse, such a suspicion ought not to be for a moment entertained; yet, all the same, they might fail to take, in their excitement, any reasonable view of the matter. The man, of whom she had just thought, would exult in accusing Stephen Speed.

And the thought of this man was revolting.

Dora felt that she had far rather be in the power of the miscreants, who now held her at their mercy, than to be alone and unprotected with her evil genius; the man whose power over her father was a mystery she had in vain striven to fathom, even when she begged her parent, upon her knees, for an explanation.

But the scout, she reflected, appeared to be well able to take care of himself.

He could easily prove the falsity of any accusation as to his complicity with her abduction, and he would insist on following her trail.

The headlong speed at which her captors traveled, bearing her at every bound further and further from all she loved, toward a fate of which she dared not even think—this, too, flashed through her mind: would it not be impossible for any one to follow, except slowly? And if so, would not her captors have an opportunity to proceed such a distance as would foil every attempt at a rescue?

Such reasonings were not calculated to lessen the poor girl's anxiety and terror.

After a time the two wretches turned abruptly, and Dora soon realized that she was within the dense, towering timber of the Guadalupe.

She knew then that she could not have remained long unconscious, and was somewhat relieved in mind at the thought; but soon she was again plunged into hopeless despair by the assertions of the miscreants to each other that the keenest-eyed Apache brave could not detect the hiding-place they proposed to seek.

Very soon she was laid blindfolded within a thicket, and then she heard the pair depart with the horses, and knew that they were now about to take such precautions as would cause it to be impossible for any trailer to discover them.

Poor Dora was almost distracted.

How long she lay thus, she could not tell; but she was further tortured by having a rope secured beneath her arms around her body, and then borne from her resting-place some distance, when she was again placed on the earth.

This was only for a few moments. Then she was held high, in the arms of one of the dastards, while the other, by the rope that had been attached to her body, drew her up in the air.

She could hear the low orders of one to the other, and the sounds of their boots on the limbs of the trees, as they climbed upward; she hanging, she knew not how high from the earth, at times stationary, but soon to be drawn upward again, until she became faint with pain and fright, expecting each moment to fall downward, and be dashed to death on the ground, or to pieces, falling through the branches and undergrowth.

She felt relief immeasurable upon being placed in a comparatively comfortable position, evidently in the crotch between two huge branches, which formed a roomy and easy reclining space, into which, as Dora knew by the feeling, the miscreants had cast a quantity of moss that had been torn from the adjacent limbs.

Her captors then climbed to a different position, but not far distant, for the maiden could hear them conversing in hoarse whispers, and the scent of whisky floated to her nostrils, regardless of the filthy handkerchief that was tied about her head, and filled her with nausea and deep disgust.

Greatly relieved was the poor girl, when one of her captors advanced over the limbs, and removed this bandage which had almost suffocated her, besides preventing her from seeing anything which transpired, or even her surroundings.

As the kerchief was removed, Dora saw that she was not far from the topmost branches of an immense tree; certainly far up from the earth; and she congratulated herself upon the fact that the ruffians had bound her fast in that position, causing it to be impossible for her to fall from the tree.

Thus surrounded, and overshadowed by dense foliage and limbs that were heavily festooned with Spanish moss, lay poor Dora Dale, her sense of hearing strained to the utmost to detect the slightest noise in the thick, dark shades around her.

And thus will we, for the present, leave her.

The whisperings of her villainous captors, the flutter of the leaves, the sighing of the breeze among the swaying moss, the creaking of the branches, and the song of birds—these were now the only sounds that reached her attentive ears.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SNAKE IN THE GRASS.

WHEN Bob Barr left his employer, Major Dale, after having discovered the trail of the count, he dashed into a dense *motte*, disappearing from the view of the old planter.

Bob, after discovering the scout some distance off, upon the trail of the abductors, and noticing that the course of Steve was eastward, or down the river, decided, without a moment's hesitation, that he would take a hand in the game; his reasons for so doing being the discovery of the trail of Count Broquier, which took a parallel course with that of the abductors.

Bob well knew that the count had not seen the latter, and consequently he had proceeded down the river for no other reason than that he had detected the course taken by Steve Speed.

From what had passed, taking the character of Broquier into consideration, the teamster, who was far from being wanting in acuteness, made up his mind that the count was bent upon taking revenge upon the young scout.

He would, doubtless, if opportunity offered, gain a position in some thicket, which Steve's evident course would lead him past, and then shoot him from the covert. The grass, at that distance from the river, was quite short; and it would not be difficult for the count to make a detour and gain a position in advance of Steve.

Thus reasoned Bob, and as he was determined to prevent the assassination of the young scout, and knew that he could not proceed with any security from observation when mounted, he quickly sprung to the earth, loosened the girth of his saddle, slipped the bridle and hung it on his saddle-horn. He then led his horse out from the west side of the *motte*, heading the animal toward the ford; knowing that the beast would seek the camp when satisfied with grazing. This done, Bob Barr was ready.

He then looked to his revolver, saw that it was in order, and stole down amid the oaks.

To his surprise, the teamster found, upon search, that there was no sign of the trail of the count; and he concluded that the latter had arisen to his feet and ran toward the river, doubtless to gain the thick timber, within which he could run at full speed, without the danger of being seen by his intended victim.

Bob, therefore, decided to turn to the river-bottom and proceed slowly along the verge of the undergrowth, closely watching and listening.

He had heard every word that had been uttered by Steve, and had been somewhat surprised to find that the scout entertained exactly the same opinions that he did in regard to the count.

That the latter was a cowardly and designing villain, who held some unaccountable power over the major, and which he intended to use to the fullest extent—even to demanding the hand of Dora Dale—had been for some time evident to the teamster. But he had kept his eyes open, and had been greatly rejoiced at the arrival of Stampede Steve, and the young man's estimate and treatment of Broquier.

He now, therefore, made a mental vow that he would prevent all harm to Steve, if possible, thus increasing the chances of Dora's rescue.

Certainly, if Steve should be slain, Dora was doomed.

The young scout had sworn to rescue her, and to prove the perfidious character of the count; and Bob resolved to assist the young scout in fulfilling his oath. He felt that the lives of both Steve and Dora depended upon him; and consequently he brought all his energies to the front, and strained his senses to the utmost to balk the fiendish villain.

But we will now leave Bob Barr proceeding warily on his self-imposed mission, and return to one on whom we must keep watch, Count Biron Broquier.

The count's first intention had been to gallop to the bottom-timber, and there watch the pro-

ceedings from a safe distance. He realized that he had barely escaped death; that he had allowed himself to go too far in expressing his contempt and jealous rage upon discovering, from the words and manner of the scout, that the latter entertained a much stronger regard for Dora Dale than circumstances warranted.

The sudden throwing of the strange projectile in his face had infuriated him; in fact he had nearly been knocked from his horse by the shock, and from all prudence by his fury.

He perceived at once that he was in a position of peril; that Steve would shoot him like a dog before he could level a weapon. He therefore decided to retreat, and await a more favorable time to avenge the insult.

Added to this his thirst for revenge, he was almost beside himself with the consciousness that Dora, the maiden who he had sworn should be his and his alone, had been stolen away and might never be recovered; thus defeating his pet scheme, his main object for a long time having been to force Major Dale to coerce his daughter into a marriage with him.

Almost maddened with these torturing emotions, the count drove spurs; but, as has been shown, came to an abrupt and most startling halt, suddenly finding himself, as the report of a revolver rung in his ears, flying through the air with great velocity, and rolling in the tall grass.

At first he thought that he was seriously wounded, and he struggled to a sitting posture, gazing backward after scanning his clothing for marks of blood and ascertaining that no limbs had been broken. Seeing his horse laid out upon the ground, and apparently dead, he knew that the bullet had pierced the animal in place of himself, and he also felt positive that the weapon had been aimed at the horse—that had the scout wished, he could as easily have planted the lead in his heart or brain.

After recovering somewhat from his confused state, Broquier crawled near his horse, and peeped through the upper portion of the grass.

The scout, major, and teamster, were in plain view; and so near, that he could distinguish every word spoken by them.

The consequence was, that the count was treated with a full and truthful dissection of his own character and aims; and he was amazed, beyond limit, at the perception of this young man, who, having met him for the first time but a few minutes previous, could thus read him like a book.

The explanation of Steve Speed, in regard to the danger of Dora, and her rescue, was a surprise that was torturing.

The maiden, whom he so madly loved, had been, it seemed, saved from a fearful death, by this handsome stranger, had fainted, and been revived by him; and, as a matter of course, had passed some time in the company of her rescuer, before the latter had departed to recover her horse.

It at once occurred to the count, that his charge, implicating the young scout with the abductors was thrown to the ground, by the fact that Steve had repaired immediately to the camp for the purpose of regaining the maiden's mustang; when, had he been a party to the outrage, he would have, at once, started off with his confederates and their captive.

Well did the sneaking miscreant know, that the denunciations of Steve by the major were occasioned by the old gentleman's having caught sight of him in the grass, and the knowledge that his words were heard.

Major Dale would have been the happiest man on earth, had the bullet of the scout pierced his brain, in place of merely hitting the horse.

This, Count Broquier knew.

Perfectly fiendish was the expression on the swarthy face of the skulker; his white teeth being close set, and his thin lips curling away from them in a beast-like manner.

Had he his rifle with him, there is no doubt he would have attempted to send a bullet into the brain of Stampede Steve.

Once, indeed, he drew his revolver, with this intention; but, knowing it was doubtful in regard to making the shot, and that if he failed he was doomed, he replaced the weapon in its scabbard, and resolved to bide his time.

When Steve avowed his intention of following the trail, and rescuing Dora, manifesting at the same time such deep interest, even to the braving of death in the attempt, the count, in his fury, jealous rage, and thirst for vengeance, rolled in the grass, tearing up the same with his teeth and hands, while his eyes flashed, like the orbs of a mad panther.

Suddenly, however, he became calmer; an exultant, cunning look came into his eyes, and he crawled some distance eastward, amid the grass and flowers, to a point where a small bush extended above the grass. From this he could look out with perfect security.

He beheld Bob spur forward, and catch the hand of the young scout in a friendly grasp; and, to his intense joy, saw that the old planter stood with his revolver pointed at Steve's breast.

It was evident that Major Dale thought the count was watching him, or else he really be-

lieved the scout to be implicated in the abduction of his daughter.

This was a pleasing tableau to Broquier.

But the pleasure thus occasioned was soon to be banished; for Steve started off on the trail, and was brought to a halt by a pleading cry from the major.

Then, to the fury of the watcher, he beheld the latter rush forward, and clutch the hand of the young scout in friendship, seeming to be pleading for pardon for his recent hostile act and words.

A fierce oath burst from the count's lips, his hands became clinched, and he ground his teeth in his rage, looking a very fiend in his impotent fury.

And thus he stood, until he saw the scout afar southward flitting amid the huge oak trees, soon turning eastward, and advancing down the river, and parallel with the same.

Again the face of Broquier changed in expression. Again it could be easily read.

Fiendish exultation, and a longing for revenge, mingled with intense joy, were plainly stamped upon it.

Major Dale and his teamster were now standing by the carcass of the steer.

This the count saw, and a settled determination seemed to have come upon him.

Sinking to the earth, he crawled rapidly eastward through the grass, for a distance of some yards; and then, half-bent, ran fleetly toward the bottom-timber of the river, within which he disappeared.

But directly, on the verge of the undergrowth, the villainous spy halted; gazing southward, from between the branches, with insane eagerness.

Soon, directly south from his position, he caught a fitting sight of Steve, the Scout; the latter, bent forward, his horse in lead, and keeping a course parallel with the river.

With a half-smothered yell of triumph, Count Biron Broquier, his dark face like that of a demon in expression, and his glance murderous, tore through the dense undergrowth, and down the Rio Guadalupe.

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE TOILS.

THE mental and physical sufferings of poor Dora Dale, as, bound and gagged, she reclined in the tree-crotch, afar up from the earth, were beyond comprehension.

Each moment seemed an hour, each hour a day; and an age it appeared to the fair sufferer before the arrows of sunlight were cast aslant through the foliage from the west.

The unfortunate maiden had heard the two miscreants decide upon continuing their journey as soon as the mantle of night fell upon the earth, creating a darkness that would enable them to travel in safety; a darkness, as Dora felt, that would be as a blinding light compared with the heavy cloud that was now over her heart and life.

She knew that in some manner her captors had succeeded in binding themselves to the tree in a recumbent position; and that they indulged in sleep was evident from their snoring.

Twice during the day had they given her food and water; but previous to removing the gag they had threatened to kill her if she made the least outcry—one with a drawn knife standing beside her while she ate sparingly.

She had pleaded, in a low voice, to be allowed to remain free from the torturing gag; but she might as well have appealed to a stone, for the brute thrust it again between her lips and teeth with an oath of impatience and anger.

Once, to her extreme horror, she had heard the two ruffians speculating in regard to the probable amount of money they would receive for her in Mexico; their conversation interlarded with oaths and obscenity, making the poor girl sick and faint with despair and terror.

She had not dared to dwell upon the object of the wretches, through fear of unbalancing her already overtaxed brain.

They certainly had not dreamed of abducting her until by accident they had discovered her by the *motte*. Had she not been so dazed and terrified by their sudden and unexpected advent she could have stolen into the thickets and easily escaped detection.

But the deed was done, and could not be undone without help appearing; and this seemed so improbable, as the time passed so slowly, that Dora was eventually plunged into the very depths of hopeless despair.

Now that she knew the destination and object of her dastardly captors, there appeared no possibility of her being rescued.

When night came it would be impossible to follow the trail of the miscreants; and that would enable them to place such a distance between them and any pursuers that it would be impossible to overtake them.

It was no wonder then, that, with such thoughts and reasonings ruling her mind, the poor girl became well-nigh crazed with anguish and horror. She believed herself doomed to a terrible fate, with no possibility of rescue; and thoughts of the agony of her father, and con-

ferences in regard to Stephen Speed, were perhaps all that saved her from losing her reason.

She was confident that her father and the young scout were on the trail; but she had no hope of rescue through them. They could not possibly find her and her abductors, in the tree-top where they were hidden.

Still, it was some consolation to be confident that efforts were being made toward rescuing her, by those whom she loved, even though she had no hope of ever again seeing them.

Tears, at times, stole through her lids, and dropped from her long lashes, running down her pallid cheeks; and these relieved, somewhat her overburdened brain.

Thus the time passed, through that long and never to be forgotten day, and the slanting bars of sunlight, from the West, proclaimed to poor Dora that the time approached, when the dastardly wretches would bear her onward toward the Rio Grande; each step separating her further and further from all that she loved—from love, and hope, and happiness—each step drawing her nearer to a dark doom, that caused her to shrink within herself in horror, and mentally pray for death instead.

Dora reasoned that, had the trail been followed, and not lost before reaching the vicinity of the river-bottom where she was, her friends would, long since, have betrayed some evidences of their presence, hence all hope had vanished. But, unknown to herself, and her captors, other human beings were in the near vicinity; each, however, being brought there by very different motives and objects.

Slowly the sun sunk, lower and lower, flooding with a fiery hue, the space between the tops of the undergrowth and the lower limbs of the huge trees.

Dora could hear the two miscreants making their way along the branches toward her, and she shuddered, with as much horror at their approach as that of venomous serpents would have created.

She felt assured that they were about to prepare for the start; that it would soon be sufficiently dark to insure their safety. She closed her eyes, feigning to sleep.

The abductors crawled with caution, making but slight noise. This caused the maiden to decide that they were apprehensive of danger; and this awakened a slight hope, where none had previously existed.

Soon, they stood directly by her side.

"She's sleepin'," whispered Lije.

"Let her snooze awhile, until we're ready. Squint keen 'round ther bottom, Lije. Dog'd ef hit ain't too ormighty still ter suit me!"

"Whist, Bill! Ye're so dod-blasted hoarse yer can't whisper 'bout bein' heerd furd'n I kin sling a bowie. I'm sorter 'spicious o' things down yonder myself. I see'd rabbits gittin' on ther jump, onc't er twicet, an' hit mought be humans thet hed started them outer the bush."

"Keep a-gazin', Lije! Hit's ormighty strange ef anybody air 'bout this hyer locate."

"Hit air sorter—"

Lije was here interrupted—both men, in fact, being so startled that Dora heard them as they clutched wildly at the limbs—by the loud and prolonged neighing of a horse, quite near them.

The sound seemed, to the poor girl, as encouraging as the shout of a friend.

A ray of hope shot through the despairing gloom that enshrouded her; but it was destined to become fainter by the words hissed by Lije:—

"Satan cuss ther condemned boss! We-'uns hedn't orter left ther critter so nigh hyer. Ef thar's any sneakin' trailers 'roun', ther nag hes guided 'em. I'd like to back his cussed nose off!"

"Hu-s-sh!" came from Bill, in caution. "Ye're gittin' too riled up ter whisper, pard. A dang'd leetle noise kin be heerd a consider'ble ways, in this hyer bottom. Don't git 'cited!"

"We-'uns'll git outer hyer O. K., bet yer life! Whar's ther whisk? I feel like errigatin'."

With a sigh of satisfaction, Bill removed the cork from the bottle that Lije passed him, and the gurgling of the liquor was plainly heard by Dora, who still kept up the appearance of slumber.

The conversation of the ruffians kept her wavering between hope and despair.

Soon she saw Lije peering downward, in evident amazement and apprehension.

Bill, at once, edged up beside his pard, and the latter, in his excitement, dropped the bottle; which fell, striking a huge limb, and was shattered to pieces. The two villains gazed into each other's eyes, furious, as well as frightened.

"Does yer want ter run our necks inter a lari-at noose?" hissed Lije, with an oath; "dang my heart ef yer hain't spilled our gravy es well es ther whisk! I swa'r I fergut what I see'd!"

Bill was speechless with fright and self-condemnation.

Just then his comrade caught his arm, and pointed below. Some twenty feet from the base of the tree, they saw the undergrowth rustling.

Above the tops of the bushes, which were now being disturbed, projected the gnarled trunk of a dead tree; the broken top of the same projecting but a couple of feet above the thickets.

Previous to the fall of the bottle, Lije and Bill had been comparatively unconcerned in regard

to dangers from below; believing, and with good grounds, that, were enemies there, they would not dream of looking in the tree-tops for them; and, did they do so, there was little likelihood of any searchers inspecting the particular tree in which they were hidden.

But, matters were now entirely changed. If trailers were really below, their place of concealment had been plainly announced to them. The fall of the whisky bottle had rendered useless all their precautions to cover their trail, and their covert as well. Hence, their present terrified state of mind.

Both the wretches fairly trembled, as they gazed downward. The bushes were not shaking as violently as at first; but, the eyes of the abductors, rendered more keen by peril and fright, detected the fact that the dead tree trunk was moving, and they felt that some one must be climbing it.

"Look! Look at that dead tree," whispered Lije; "somethin's onter hit! Satan tortur' me, ef we-uns ain't corral'd; an' ef we scrouge outen this without ther gal, we're dang'd lucky! Watch ther dead tree! Cuss hit! I wish I was straddle o' my crutcher."

As may be supposed, poor Dora was most intensely excited by the words of her captors, and their manner. She no longer breathed heavily, as if in slumber; indeed she held her breath, and concentrated all the power of her senses to that of listening. Her friends must be near!

She judged that they were on the trail, or had followed it as far as there was any 'sign' visible; and had, since, lain hidden in the undergrowth, satisfied that those they were seeking were not far off.

The horses of the outlaws had, doubtless, been discovered; which would be plain proof to the trailers that they had come up with their game.

If, thought Dora, this should be Stephen Speed, and he revealed himself, he would be shot by these wretches. This thought was agony to the poor girl. It seemed to her that, no sooner had she the slightest ground for hope, than that hope was destined to be crushed out.

And, she was not free from a terrible apprehension from another source.

Lije had intimated to Bill, that they might be forced to steal away without their captive.

This brought a dread possibility before her.

If they who had stolen her, should now abandon her, they were fiendish enough to leave her as she was, bound and gagged, to starve! To die a lingering death of terrible torture, without the power to make an outcry; for, it was probable that any one who might be searching for her, would be unable to find her—they might, in fact, pass through the tree-tops, within ten feet, and not discover her; she being unable to guide them in any way, even by giving vent to her anguish by a shriek or groan!

The contemplation of such a fate was horrible; and so oppressed was the poor maiden by this seeming possibility, that she was, for the time, totally unconscious of her position and surroundings. Although this lasted, what seemed to her a long time, it was but momentary; and she was brought back to actual realities by hearing a hiss of caution from Lije to Bill.

The next instant, both miscreants uttered half-suppressed ejaculations of amazement and terror.

"Satan drag me inter tortur'! what's thet?" whispered Bill; and Dora, as the villain's arm was now against her shoulder, felt that he trembled, and could hear his teeth chatter.

Lije made no reply, but his labored breathing proved that he was terribly agitated.

Suddenly he heaved a deep sigh of apparent relief, and a moment after nearly lost his clutch on the tree, shaking with suppressed laughter, which nearly choked him, especially when he again attempted to whisper to Bill.

The latter groaned in horror, saying, hoarsely:

"Dang an' double yer up, Lije! Air yer gone plum lunified? What d'yer see ter laugh at?"

"I sw'ar, I b'lieve I'll git an' go hit alone! All I see air a man's head, an' ef he ain't on ther peeparter we-uns an' ther gal, I'm a liar by ther watch! Air thet a laughin' matter?"

"Satan burn yer, Bill! Yer kin stay right hyer alone wi' ther gal. I'm goin' down ter j'ine thet cuss on ther tree."

"Why, dang yer, Bill, thet's my ole side-pard, Dusky Dick—Dick Dunning—what I hain't see'd fer nigh two year! Ef this hain't a lucky trail, I'm a bamboozled idiot!"

"Why, man, he's a high-fly cuss, an' hes cut a heap o' throats, though I'll low he allers gits ther deadwood on his game fust off."

"Pard, we're hunk ef we gits in wi' Dusky Dick. Why, I'd know ther face o' ther cuss a mile through ther fire in Tophet!"

The amazement of Bill was far too deep for words.

He could hardly believe his senses; but before he really comprehended the words of his pard in their full meaning and extent, that worthy had vanished, crawling in a stealthy manner down the tree.

The gaze of Bill became once more fastened upon the limbless trunk of the dead tree below him.

Clinging to that huge stump was a man, the head and shoulders of whom were alone visible above the tops of the undergrowth.

The face of this man was turned upward, his black and serpent-like eyes wandering in a searching gaze around the tree-tops, the dark shades above the flood of crimson light from the setting sun, shining between bushes and branches from the west.

The face was like that of a demon, contorted with fury—a villainous and murderous visage, a gloomy and swarthy one.

It was that of him whom we have known as Count Biron Broquier, the friend and associate of Major Duncan Dale—of him who had just been recognized by Lasso Lije as "Dusky Dick," an old partner in crime!

CHAPTER X.

CALLING UPON THE DUMB.

HERE was a fresh disappointment for Dora Dale.

Instead of the man on the tree-trunk being a friend in search of her, the words of Lasso Lije proved that the new-comer was a cut-throat—a boon companion, and old confederate!

"Wa-al, I'll jist be eternally bamboozled, an' befogged, an' blindfolded, ef this hyer doesn't knock spots outen anythin' I've see'd ontill yit!"

"Cuss me, ef I warn't plum sart'in Lije hed gone lunified; an' I ain't so ormighty sure thet hain't what's ther matter with him ontill yit! Ef thet cuss air Lije's ole pard, why we're hunk, ef they doesn't run in on us too thick."

"He's got a ugly figur' head enough ter be p'ison, an' he's 'bout es swarthy es a Greaser!"

"Dusky Dick air a 'prop'iate cog' fer him, I'll sw'ar! But, how in ther dickens did he happen ter turn up hyer, jist at this time; 'specially 'mong this sorter biz! Somehow, I doesn't like hit."

"Lije air gittin' off his cabase wi' whisk', er I'm badly fooled! He's boun' ter ruinat things, ef thar's any ranchers comin' on our trail."

"Hit's mighty easy ter be mistaken 'bout a man's mug, 'specially in this hyer dub'us light. I'll keep a eye open fer chances ter skute—dang'd ef I doesn't! I ain't ready ter furnish a carkiss fer a lynch-picnic jist yit."

Thus soliloquized Bill Bowers, as he still gazed downward; and his words were not such as to offer a gleam of hope to the eager listener.

Bill had come to the conclusion that matters were in a mixed condition, and he was soon destined to realize that he was about right.

He had heard but little noise, as Lije had climbed down the tree, and he watched very anxiously for what was to follow. He could distinguish the rustle in the undergrowth beneath, and he knew that his pard was on the way direct to the stranger. Another glance showed Bill, that the thicket beyond the stump was also slightly agitated. As there was no breeze, the least movement of a leaf was very easily detected.

Yet the man on the dead tree, appeared not to be aware of the approach of any one; for the very good reason, that he had evidently discovered that some moving object was in his front.

The stranger no longer looked upward.

His eyes were fixed upon the rustling tops of the undergrowth, and Bill saw him climbing still higher, and caught the glitter of a knife in his hand. He felt anxious, and greatly worried.

He could scarce refrain from calling aloud, in warning to Lije; but, on second thought, he kept silent. Then it was that, again the prolonged neighing of a horse sounded, from down the river; evidently the same animal that had previously broken the silence of the timber.

This sound seemed to startle the stranger.

It certainly startled Bill; but, in a moment more, they were all still more so, for an answering "whinny" came from up the river.

Bill knew on the instant, as well as if he had seen them, that parties who had followed their trail were near at hand.

Both his horse and that of his pard were down the river, secured in a natural "open."

He trembled as if in an ague fit, but after a moment's reflection, decided that he was in a far safer position than Lije. He longed for a drink of whisky to brace his nerves, as he muttered:

"Cuss ther luck! I'll hev ter skute alone. Ther game air up, an' ther ranchers'll rake ther board. But they sha'n't git ther gal ef they hurts Lije er captur's him. Dang me ef they do!"

"She shell stay hyer fer buzzard-feed, fer gittin' me an' my pard inter sich a kittle o' fish!"

Poor Dora took in the whole horror of her situation, but her cowardly captor paid no attention to her; in fact, except in words to himself, he seemed oblivious of her near presence.

As matters had thus far proceeded, it was evident to Bill that the climax must soon arrive—that something, yet more startling, was soon to occur. And the miscreant was not wrong in his conjecture. He had not long to wait.

His eyes were fastened upon the swarthy face

of the man who, Lije had asserted, was one of themselves—his pard, Dusky Dick.

Suddenly the face of the latter seemed to become ghastly, and his head twitched spasmodically as he strove to gaze downward and backward. The next moment his shoulders and head were jerked from view, and then there shot through the timber, echoing and re-echoing, a most unearthly shriek.

This was followed by another, evidently from the same throat, and then came a far-sounding plunge and a great spattering of waters, as if some heavy body had been hurled into the river over the high bank.

"Satan burn me! What's thet?"

Such was Bill's ejaculation.

Filled with wonder, her blood chilled by the fearful shrieks, Dora panted for breath, still watching her abductor, whose gaze was fixed downward.

From indications, Bill believed that Lije was pressing toward the river to ascertain the fate of Dusky Dick; for the latter was, he could not doubt, the man who had uttered those cries, having probably been stabbed and then hurled into the river. Bill mentally cursed his pard for being such an idiot as thus to risk himself.

He had no time for thought, however; for but a few moments elapsed when a terrible yell of fright and despair rung through the timber, followed by another far-sounding plunge into the river, in the same way as before.

Then all became silent as death.

Cold perspiration stood in great beads on the brow of Bill, and he could hardly maintain his position on the branches. His very hair seemed to crawl upon his head, like scorched snakes.

He had not the slightest doubt in regard to the fate of Lije and Dusky Dick. Both he felt assured, had been killed and flung into the river by those who had followed the trail.

Bill knew that he would be hanged like a dog if captured; and he saw little chance of escape unless he at once descended from the tree, while the searchers were near the river.

This he decided to do.

"Satan tortur' ther gal! She's bin ther death o' Lije an' his old pard. I'll let her sot whar she air, dang'd ef I sha'n't!"

"I won't take ther gag outen her mouth, fer then she'd yelp, an' I'd be a goner, dead sure!"

Without further delay, Bill clambered along the limbs, passing from one tree to another toward the outer edge of the bottom-timber, and fearing to descend to the earth near the point, where he had reason to believe he would be shot.

To describe the horror of poor Dora, as she heard the words of Bill, and the stealthy sounds caused by his departure, would be beyond the power of language. Notwithstanding the conviction that friends were in the vicinity, the unhappy girl fully realized that the chances were very slim that she should be discovered.

She could not cry out. She could not answer them, if they called aloud to her.

Hopeless as she had been when first in the power of her abductors, she felt that her present position was far more terrible. Then there was more chance of her being rescued; but now she was bound fast, and hidden in the tree, without the power to speak. Then she was furnished with food and water, but this was so no longer.

What a fearful fate stared her in the face!

Doomed to suffer the tortures of the lost, with a thirst which she already felt strongly; doomed to die by starvation, and that while red-jowled buzzards perched upon the limbs over her head and around her, awaiting her dissolution.

All this was torture, almost beyond the fortitude of an Indian brave; and she was but a young and delicate maiden, who had been petted from her infancy, her every want anticipated, and must she die thus?

It was horrible, most horrible.

The wonder was that she retained her senses, that she did not faint or fall into a comatose state; and she doubtless would have done so had she not known that if help were to come, it must come this blessed night. Already the sun had disappeared, and darkness and horror seemed to have confederated to smother out her young life, engulfing her in wretchedness.

But, at the very moment that threatened the dethronement of the poor girl's reason, a yell sounded on the night air, but a short distance toward the south. She knew the direction by the glow of the sunset, which she had previously noticed.

Bill Bowers had stolen away, in that direction; and, as the yell was expressive of mortal terror, Dora believed it must proceed from him, and that he had fallen into the hands of them, or been slain by them.

Had he been captured? Oh, how she hoped and prayed, from her inmost soul, that he had; for, then, he would be forced to reveal her whereabouts!

Even this he might not be able to do, since darkness had fallen upon the earth; but he could do so, if they waited until the morning.

After being tortured by such thoughts as had so recently ruled her mind, to remain as she was for the night did not seem so great a torture to her, when she was buoyed up with the hope of release in the morning. From the time that the yell sounded, hope again entered Dora's heart, and she listened intently—the one sense that she could employ—to gain any idea as to what was transpiring so near her.

For a few minutes she heard nothing. Silence, deep and profound, ruled the timber. Then, out beyond the ribbon of trees that bordered the river, as she judged, Dora heard frantic outcries, which drew nearer and nearer; as if he who uttered them was dashing, at a gallop, down the border of the timber. As the rider advanced, his voice sounded more distinct, and was expressive of an anguish that seemed almost insupportable.

Suddenly, as it seemed, the rider turned a bend in the timber; when, clear and wild, sounded the cries, now plainly distinguishable:

"Dora! Dora, my darling! Where are you? Where have the fiends taken her? They shall not tear my child from me! Villains, dastards, miscreants—give me back my child!"

The reader can imagine the agony of the daughter, on hearing these piteous cries from her father, and she powerless to answer him.

The cries ceased, and then Dora heard other voices.

A friend had, evidently, stopped her father, and was telling him what had thus far, been accomplished.

She could not recognize the speaker at first, but soon a voice, loud and clear, rung in her ears.

"Dora! Oh, Dora, I say! Where are you? Friends are at hand, and your enemies are gone. You are safe!"

"Your father, is here. Call out, that we may find you. Speak! Can't you hear us?"

"O—oh, Dora! Dora Dale! Don't you recognize my voice? It is I—your friend, Stephen Speed! Dora! O—oh, Dora!"

Again all was silent as the grave.

No outcry, no answer to the anguished hearts of those who listened so breathlessly.

It was terrible on both sides. She so near them, and unable to make her presence known—they, in the agonies of an apprehension the most fearful!

CHAPTER XI.

IN PARALLEL LINES.

STEVE, the Scout, had followed the trail, at some places finding it quite difficult to detect the "sign." However, he reached the near vicinity of the point where the abductors had swerved from the course they had so long traveled, and had turned toward the timber of the Guadalupe, soon after the sun had passed meridian.

The young scout at once decided correctly in regard to the object of the outlaws.

They had kept within the oak openings, not daring to venture on the open plain; as any, who might follow to rescue Dora, would observe them, and give chase. But, having remained in the oak belt as long as they thought prudent, they had taken to the timber, with the evident intention of secreting themselves until darkness should favor their departure.

Without doubt they would use every means in their power to avoid leaving "sign."

Thus Steve reasoned, and in place of following the plain trail further, he turned in a direct course north, to the dense timber. There he secreted his horse in an "open" within the timber.

Steve was in great anxiety of mind in regard to the safety and condition of the maiden whom he sought. The distress of her father had affected the scout deeply, in addition to the interest he felt in the beautiful girl.

He resolved that Major Dale should not only have his daughter restored to him, but that he should be freed from the persecutions of the perfidious count, and that he himself would accomplish both. He wanted no more pleasing object in view than the unmasking of such a villain; but he concluded that he could not hope for much assistance in that line from the old planter, although the latter was the person who was chiefly interested.

Neither did he believe that Dora could give him any information concerning the power that this Broquier held over her father. Yet the young scout was no less determined to tear the mask from the so-called count without such clew.

Had he known that the individual in question was but a short distance from where he then stood—that the count had run, tearing through thickets like a maniac, in order to keep him in sight, and carry out a fiendish plot he had concocted when crouched in the grass by the ford, he could scarce have been more cautious.

First, however, all his energies must be bent upon the rescue of Dora. He therefore strove to believe that the maiden was, thus far, safe, and free from suffering, except the terror and concern occasioned by her capture.

Steve believed Dora Dale would reason that,

as he had left to find her horse, he would have soon returned, and finding her gone, would at once decide what had happened.

In that case she could not be hopeless.

This was a consolation to him which nerved him on in his most difficult task, all his skill as a scout being needed to be able to glide through the timber and undergrowth without betraying his presence. He had but little hope, however, of tracing the abductors to their covert, after he had discovered their horses.

Fully two hours were occupied by the young scout in striking the horse-trail after it had entered the timber. Then he crawled upon his hands and knees to the natural "open" where the animals had been left, lariatd to bushes.

This was the end of the trail.

To follow the footsteps of the abductors, on the thick carpet of leaves amid the shades, would have been next to impossible, even to an Apache.

At certain places they could not avoid bending and even breaking bushes and twigs, yet, after hours of stealthy search Steve was forced to admit himself baffled. He felt that, did he expose himself to discovery, or make any unusual noise, the villains would be doubly cautious in their departure, taking measures that would very probably put all chance of rescue out of the question.

The silence, especially when the young scout was so confident that Dora was very near him, made him think that she must be bound and gagged.

He was positive that the miscreants would not venture to leave the bottom-timber until darkness covered their flight, and he determined when the sun had set to hasten and secrete himself on the border of the "open" in which the horses had been secured, and there await the coming of the abductors.

Steve was confident that he could rescue the maiden—indeed, he had no doubts on the subject, or he would have become frantic during the long delay. He was nerved by a strength and fury that made him feel equal to tearing the wretches limb from limb; indeed, he could scarce contain himself when he thought of Dora's probable position.

Little dreamed he that several times the serpent-like eyes of Broquier had shot glances of hatred and fury from different coverts at him; that he had himself been the means of guiding the man he so detested, on the trail of the abductors.

But so it was; for at times the count had halted in his mad rush, to peep from the outer edge of the undergrowth and satisfy himself that the scout was within view. The wily scoundrel had detected the halt of Steve, and knew that the latter must have arrived in the vicinity of the ones he sought. Many times had he been in a position to shoot the scout, but no movement did he make, though he had sworn to have his blood.

His dark face would become more fiendish in expression, but yet, by a powerful effort of will he would control himself, and with a demon smile draw back into the gloomier shades.

Why was this?

The plot which the dastard had formed while crouching in the grass, will explain. He had resolved to follow Steve, using him as his guide, by keeping him in view. Broquier felt that such a man as the young scout would keep his oath, and rescue Dora Dale; in fact, the villain had no doubt in this respect, until he had watched his foe during the fruitless search for "sign"—then he began to grow restive and impatient.

But, as the cunning sneak eventually heard the whisking of the horses' tails, and recalled the fact that Steve had been within the thickets, where the animals then were, he understood why the scout lingered, after searching in vain for evidences of the lurking-place of the outlaws.

His plans, then, seemed more reasonable.

He had resolved to await until Stampede Steve should have rescued Dora, and slain her captors—as he felt sure the young man, in his fury, would accomplish—then he would kill Steve, and bear Dora back to camp.

No doubt the maiden would faint during the conflict, and he would swear that one of the outlaws had killed her preserver, and thrown the corpse, as well as that of his comrade—whom Broquier would state that Steve had slain—into the river.

In this way, the count was convinced that he could settle it all to his own satisfaction.

By carrying out this plan, not only would he gain his coveted revenge, but Dora Dale would feel that she owed her life to him.

When Count Broquier thought over this plan, his exultation was great, and his joy extreme.

He would use his enemy, who had so humiliated him, as a tool to work out the very aim, which he was assured the scout had sworn to defeat.

This was the explanation of the count's course. This was the reason that the miscreant did not make any hostile movement, when he had the life of the young scout in his power.

But there was a very strong reason outside of the consideration of his plans, why Broquier

did not attempt the life of the man he so feared and hated.

First, if he did so, the abductors of Dora would become alarmed, and fly, bearing with them the maiden who, he had sworn, should be his together with her ample fortune.

Even did they not flee, they might, guided by the report of his pistol, steal upon him, and murder him. Nothing was more likely.

He dared not trust to his knife, for he was well assured that the scout would master him in any such quarrel; and slay him, even though he might himself receive a mortal wound.

This will explain the position and object of the two men, who were now in the neighborhood of Dora and her captors.

But there was still another, and that was Bob Barr, the teamster. He had followed the count, like a sleuth-hound, and had reached the halting place of the abductors soon after Broquier.

Keeping in the vicinity of the count, Bob watched him as a cat would a mouse, crawling, snake-like, after Broquier; and, had the latter made the slightest attempt to harm the young scout, the teamster would have sprung upon him, and plunged his knife into his heart.

Thus, three persons were in the undergrowth—Steve Speed, with his heart and soul bent upon the rescue of Dora Dale, and the punishment of her cowardly abductors; Count Broquier, waiting for the expected rescue, when he intended to kill the scout, and carry Dora back to the camp of her father; and Bob Barr, rendered furious every time he caught sight of the count, and bent upon the death of the latter, or the frustrating of any attempt he might make upon Steve.

The scout knew nothing of the near presence of the others. Broquier was ignorant that the teamster was anywhere near. But the latter was posted as to the movements of both; and was also confident that the outlaws, with their fair captive, were close at hand.

He crouched, therefore, with senses strained, ready, at any moment, to take a hand in the expected encounter and rescue; or, at least, to forward the efforts of Steve, the Scout.

CHAPTER XII.

THE WORK WELL BEGUN.

JUST previous to the time when the outlaws were first alarmed by the neighing of one of their horses, Steve had stolen silently to his own animal, to procure some cartridges from his saddle-bags; and, consequently, he was not near the tree, at the time the whisky-bottle fell.

Had the young scout remained where he was, doubtless events would have taken a different turn; for the abductors would have had him at a very decided advantage, had he climbed the tree in which they were. And this he probably would have done.

Thus, all happened for the best.

But, in this way, the fall of the bottle, and the descent of Lasso Lije, from the tree, were both unknown to Steve Speed.

Broquier, however, had not observed the young man's movement; and, as he failed, upon stealthy search, to discover the scout, he became furious, and started to investigate matters. This led him directly toward the tree, at the very time that Lije and Bill were gazing downward.

The fall of the bottle increased the count's alarm and excitement, but it gave him a clew.

Until then, he had not thought of the abductors, and their captive, as being in the tree-tops; but he was now convinced that such was the case, and he climbed the tall stump to reconnoiter.

Bob Barr was also greatly excited, for he believed that the captors of Dora were about to depart; and, if so, the poor girl might be taken beyond all hope of rescue.

Noticing the actions of Broquier, the teamster became infuriated and resolved upon immediate action, reasoning that he could be of no assistance to Steve or Dora if he merely kept on the trail of the count. Bob was almost frenzied at the disappearance of the young scout and the movements of Broquier. He, therefore, stole fast on the trail of the latter, determined to throw him out of the game, and to do all in his power to find Dora by co-operating with Steve.

When the bottle fell, Bob was too distant to locate it; but it caused him to decide at once that the outlaws were secreted in the tree-tops, and not far from his position.

Again the sound made by the horse was answered by another animal up the river.

The teamster was almost beside himself with self-condemnation at having wasted so much time, feeling that Steve needed support, for that the dastards were now preparing for the start.

Stealing forward rapidly, Bob perceived the legs of Broquier—that worthy being on the dead tree—and he lost no further time. With the fury of desperation he clutched the count, jerked him downward, dashed with him toward the river, and, with herculean strength, hurled the sneaking and howling miscreant

afar out over the bank of the river into the dark waters!

With a sounding plunge, he disappeared in the depths.

Bob delayed not an instant. His blood was coursing hot through his veins. He believed that Dora's safety hung upon the next few moments.

Rushing into the thicket, to his surprise he ran against some one, whom he likewise clutched.

At first he thought it was Steve; but the man called out, sharply:

"Dang it, Dusky Dick, not so fast! I'm Lasso Life, yer ole pard!"

This was enough for Bob Barr.

It was not Stampede Steve.

Then it must be an enemy.

Bob had the advantage, and improved it.

High in air, at arm's length, by a tremendous exertion the teamster raised Lije, and ran to the river-bank, his victim yelling with terror, but prevented, held as he was, from making even the slightest defense.

In another instant the cowardly abductor felt himself shooting through the air.

Another far-sounding plunge was heard, and the second victim of the exultant teamster disappeared beneath the dark waters of the Guadalupe!

Just then Steve came up.

The shriek of Broquier had startled the scout. He thought it came from Dora Dale, and ran to the river-bank, his victim yelling with terror, but upon slight reflection, he became convinced that the cry came from a man in mortal terror.

Could it be that the two miscreants were contending for the possession of their captive?

If so, now was his grand opportunity.

At any event the sounds would lead him, without doubt, to where Dora was. He therefore hastened on through the undergrowth less cautiously than before. Steve, making his way toward the river, heard the fearful yells of Lasso Life.

What could the terrible sounds mean?

Convinced that Dora Dale was, in some manner, connected with these shrieks, the scout stole forward, revolver in hand, and gained the very point where Bob had stood but a moment before.

All was silent as death. Steve Speed gazed down upon the dark waters, satisfied that, within their depths, was at least one of those whom he had heard shrieking in despair; for he had also heard the plunge of Life into the river.

He listened intently, and soon a spluttering and heavy breathing were heard, mingled with gurgling sounds. A man was in the water.

Who was he?

Mentally Steve asked this question.

Where was Dora?

Certainly one of her captors was in the river.

Where was the other?

Whither had he retreated so quickly?

To follow him would be to find Dora Dale.

Steve now listened for sounds inland.

He heard a slight rustle of the undergrowth. Then, as this came from quite near, the young scout stole forward half of the way, then paused, and detecting movements, bounded like a madman, crashing through the thickets. Soon he and Bob Barr were rolling in desperate conflict amid the bushes; but neither of them wishing to kill the other. Each expected his assailant could be compelled to lead him to Dora.

Thus each strove to prevent the other from using his weapon, as they struggled desperately.

But this did not long continue; for Steve, thinking he had his adversary helpless, hissed out:

"Curse you! I'd split your heart, were it not that I intend to force from you what I must know! Speak, fiend in human shape! Where is your innocent victim—where is Dora Dale?"

To the utter astonishment of the scout his opponent replied with an immoderate laugh:

What could he mean?

Had the wretch gone insane?

But speech quickly followed the laughter; the familiar words and intonation of which caused quite as much surprise to Steve as the merriment.

"Dog-gone yer, Stampede Steve! Doesn't yer know yer friends? Let up, I tell yer! I'm Bob Barr, an' thar's hefty biz ahead."

"We-uns must skute lively, er Miss Dora air a goner. I lunged one o' ther cusses inter ther river, and I war dead sartin you war ther t'other, ontill yer shot off yer tongue."

Up sprung Steve, crying out:

"In the name of wonder, how came you here, Bob! What does all this rumpus mean?"

"Thet'll keep without salt, pard," returned the teamster; "but come on speedy, if yer wants ter help Miss Dora. Ther cuss what's gut her'll skute arter hearin' ther yells o' his pard."

"I know 'bout whar they comed from. Come on, Steve—levant!"

Without a word the young scout sprung forward.

Steve and Bob separated some twenty paces apart, and passed directly beneath the tree in the branches of which was poor Dora.

Just then the scout caught the sound of Bill's boots, as the outlaw clambered from limb to limb to gain a distance from the tree in which his captive was, and then descend, make a detour, and, if possible, secure his horse. It was thus he hoped to escape.

Through the undergrowth crawled Steve, keeping beneath the miscreant, who was so terrified that he forgot to be prudent.

Reaching what he thought to be a safe distance, Bill hastily lowered himself by a huge grape-vine; but just as he came near the ground, he felt his weapons jerked from his belt, and realized that he was lost. With yells of terror, he let go the vine; but a powerful blow from Steve's fist knocked him senseless.

Binding the villain's arms and legs, the scout gave a low whistle; but this was not needed, for the teamster had heard the yells, and interpreted them aright.

"Bully for we-uns!" exclaimed Bob, as he came up; "they air all corral'd now, an' we'll choke this hyer cuss ontill he spits out ther locate o' Miss Dora."

"Did you kill the other fiend?" asked Steve.

"I don't reckon he's gone up—that air, ef he c'u'd swim. I chucked him inter the river. I reckon he won't be lierble ter scratch dirt on this side ther drink. I gi'n him sich a scare."

"You can explain everything when we get out of here," said Steve; "but first give us a lift with this rascal, and we'll take him into clear ground on the border of the timber."

"I'll hash him into cat-fish bait if he doesn't tell where they have hidden Miss Dale!"

"By heavens, Bob, I dare not think of what that poor girl must have suffered!"

"We'll git her, Steve," said the teamster, in a confident tone; "hyer we goes."

On through the dense undergrowth the two men carried the senseless Bill Bowers, and soon emerged from the timber to what was comparatively clear ground; but at the very moment that they put down their burden upon the sward, Major Dale dashed around the bend from the west at headlong speed, filling the calm evening air with his loud and anguished outcries, as has been already narrated.

CHAPTER XIII.

SO NEAR, AND YET SO FAR.

NEARLY wild with relief and joy was the agonized father when he saw his teamster and Stampede Steve. Had he not discovered them he would, in his mad misery, have gone on, only knowing that he was riding in the same direction as the abductors of his daughter.

Unable to bear the anguish of mind in regard to his child's danger, the old planter had left camp alone and started after Steve on the trail. Dashing up, he now exclaimed:

"Oh! I'm so glad to see a human being, but especially you, my boys! But, for Heaven's sake, can you give me some good tidings of Dora? Have you seen her?"

"Cheer up, major," said the young scout, pointing to the senseless outlaw. "There lies one of the rascals, and Bob has thrown the other into the river. We have not found Miss Dora yet, but we'll find out from that wretch."

"Have you water in your canteen, major?"

"Yes—here, take it! You have done bravely, boys; we could not expect more, I suppose. But how is it that you captured those villains, and yet have not found my daughter?"

The young men now explained matters, and Bob Barr proceeded to pour water on Bill's head.

Anxious as the scout was, he strove to conceal the feeling from Major Dale.

"I think, major," he explained, "that the poor child is bound and gagged. They have concealed her in some thick-t. but we will find her. Dismount, and I will stake your horse."

With a groan the old man complied, and Steve then said to the teamster:

"Bob, do you think that other cuss, whom you threw in the river will dare come on this side if he escapes being drowned?"

"He mought, Steve; hit's hard tellin'. We-uns wants ter guard ag'in' bit anyways, fer he'd risk a heap ter git even on ther deal."

"This is terrible!" said the scout. "He might get away with Dora yet. Is it safe to yell?"

"I want to try and get an answer from her. If she is not gagged she will reply. That is, if those villains have not killed her!"

"Yell away, pard Steve! Hit'll let ther cuss know we air hyer, an' air es lierble ter do good as harm. It mought scar' the condemned pirut, an' pervent him comin'."

"I'll fotch this cuss 'roun' ter biz in a bit."

And yell Steve Speed did; and poor Dora Dale heard, as the reader knows, but could not answer. Silence, deep and profound, followed.

The old major joined Steve and Bob in the loud calls, stopping occasionally to listen, while the expression of his face was painful to witness.

Luckily the moon arose to dissipate the darkness, and to a certain extent the gloom of the bottom-timber.

The old planter groaned aloud, as time passed, and silence still reigned.

Under Bob's treatment, Bill began to revive.

Steve had given full vent to his fury and rage, when he struck the outlaw.

It had been a terrible blow.

"This will not do," he now said, in great anxiety and apprehension; "Major, recover that infernal villain, and Bob and I will strike into the timber. That wretch had, no doubt, been guarding Miss Dale, and sloped when he heard the yell of his pard."

"Dang'd ef I hain't gut an idee!" suddenly broke out Bob Barr, as Steve ceased speaking; "ef ther cuss war keepin' guard over Miss Dora, an' levanted when he was skeered, what war he in ther tree 'bout? He w'u'dn't a' clumb hit ef he'd wanted ter skute. Does yer take?"

"I see, Bob; I see," said the scout, quickly; "and I was a fool not to have thought of it before. The young lady is concealed in a tree-top, bound and gagged!"

"Come on! We'll find her, and woe to that cuss you flung into the river, if we run against him."

"Cheer up, Major Dale! We'll find Miss Dora. Pump that devil when he comes back to Texas!"

The face of the old planter brightened. Then, as the two young men sprung into the timber, he dashed the remaining water into the face of Bill; at the same time, giving the miscreant a powerful kick.

A fierce oath burst from Bill's lips, followed by a snarl of fury, as he glared into the major's face.

This was more than human nature could bear; and, indeed, something of this character was needed just then to change the unhappy father's emotions, for he was really on the verge of distraction.

Like a panther, he sprung upon the cowardly abductor of his darling child; catching the ruffian by the throat, his eyes flashing with insane fury.

"Where is my daughter, you infernal demon!" the major shrieked, as his clutch upon the outlaw's throat tightened until the eyes of the latter bulged from their sockets, and his tongue protruded from his mouth.

"Speak, curse you, or by heaven I'll throttle you! Where is my daughter?"

Not until Bill Bowers grew black in the face did Major Dale loosen his grip upon the wretch's throat.

It was some time before Bill could articulate a word—several moments of contorting and gasping.

"Speak, curse you! or I'll choke the vile life from your loathsome carcass! Where, I say, is my child? Where have you hidden her? Speak! Do you wish to die the death of a dog?"

Little less of vengeful fury was depicted in the face of the old planter, than in that of the helpless villain.

Bill Bowers had suddenly changed.

In the tree he had been a trembling coward. He had fled, in terror, when he heard the despairing shriek of Lasso Life, his pard.

He had believed himself to be safe, when he was slipping down the grape-vine. His mind was filled with fiendish exultation, at the thought of having had his revenge for the death of Lije; for, had he not doomed the maiden—the prime cause of it all, as she had been the temptation in their way—to a lingering and terrible death? She would die in the tree-top. The buzzards would be with her in her last moments. This was victory to the depraved wretch. It was his revenge for everything else.

Such thoughts had filled the demon's mind, at the very moment when Steve's blow felled him senseless.

When he recovered, and was kicked and choked by the major, whose words proved him to be the father of the girl, the villain well knew that he was doomed—that nothing would save him. Even though he gave the information desired, he would be hanged just the same. Bill felt that his time had come.

This old man, if infuriated beyond control, would not be satisfied with slowly strangling him.

He decided that he would answer in such a way, that the old man would lose sight of the slower and more torturing death, and use his weapons. Thus he would not only escape hanging, but would have avenged Lije's death as well as his own.

Desperate, indeed, was the miscreant.

The fear of the rope was an incentive to hasten death from any other source. And so he decided.

Regaining his breath, Bill replied to Major Dale, in a manner that was certainly calculated to produce the desired result—an immediate death!

The old planter had arisen to his feet, and stood, like a Nemesis, over his victim; his hands outstretched, and his fingers bent in a manner that was suggestive of the threatened strangling.

With eyes flashing his hatred and triumph,

Bill replied, in a taunting voice, to the father's demand for knowledge of his child:

"She's whar yer'll never see her ag'in, yer ole coward cuss! She's way in a tree, a long way from hyer, an' she's tied fast thar, 'sides hevin' her mouth chuck-full o' buckskin. She can't speak, an' yer c'u'dn't find her, not ef yer went within ten foot of her."

"She's hungry, an' nigh dead fer water, but thet air nothin' ter what's comin'. Yer purty gal air goin' ter hev her eyes picked out by buzzards, ole man!"

"She's gut ter lay thar, an' starve, an' rot, d'yer hear? Hit's a pity, but she's boun' ter be buzzard-feed!"

Depraved, degraded, desperate though he was, Bill Bowers was forced to stop; so unearthly was the drawn and ghastly face of the old planter, as the fearful words of the miscreant were thus hurled at him. They seemed to the agonized parent, to pierce his brain like a shaft of white-hot steel.

Appalled was the wretch, at the effect of his dreadful words; even though he expected and wished for death.

For a full half-minute thus stood Major Dale; then his nerves began to twitch, and with a snarl like that of a wild beast, he sprung upon Bill Bowers, his long fingers clutching around the villain's throat.

Powerless was Bill to make an outcry, or even to articulate a word, so horrified was he at the terrible storm he had created—at the unearthly aspect of the outraged and insulted father!

And, for all the effort he had made to prevent it, he was still doomed to be strangled; and this he quickly realized when the old man sprung upon him.

Again the merciless fingers clinched around the throat of Bill Bowers, and became tightened in a jerky manner—tightened until again, the eyes and tongue protruded, and the face was black!

Then came a change in the fearful scene; a most startling change to those who were in the bottom-timber, had they been there to see. Out from the undergrowth sprung two horses, at frantic speed, a rider upon each, galloping headlong toward the old planter and his victim.

A heavy thud sounded on the air, and the old planter fell senseless into the grass!

The cords that bound Bill were severed, and gasping and staring wildly, the miserable wretch was dragged to the side of Major Dale's horse, and placed astride of the animal.

"Spur! Spur for your life!" cried out one of the riders, as he urged his horse up alongside the beast upon which Bill had been placed.

The other horseman dashed up on the opposite side, and both lashed the animal along at breakneck speed; while Bill Bowers, more dead than alive, clung to the saddle-horn.

And so, on into the oaks, and up the river, the trio sped; Bill's gaze fixed upon the man to his right, in superstitious horror. His mouth was agape, and he really, in his demoralized state, believed that the ghost of his pard had come back to earth, and saved him from a terrible death; for the right hand out-rider was Lasso Lije.

The reader need hardly be told the name of the one on the left.

It was the man whom Bill had seen on the dead tree stump, and whom Lije had declared to be his old pard, Dusky Dick.

Most certainly, it was the very individual whom we have known, as Count Biron Broquier.

And on the three miscreants dashed on, the back trail, toward the scene of the abduction; on, through the oak openings that, in the weird moonlight appeared uncanny enough.

But the trio of horsemen themselves, seemed like fiends let loose upon the earth from Hades, for a night of crime!

CHAPTER XIV.

OUT OF THE DEPTHS.

COUNT BROQUIER had been terrified, beyond expression, as his wild shriek had testified, when he had been hurled by the teamster into the river.

Scarcely had he time to think, when he found himself beneath the dark waters. The current was strong, but he struggled desperately, and at last succeeded in clutching an overhanging branch.

Not until assured of his safety from death by drowning, did he try to reason upon the most startling event that had so dumfounded him. He had received a great shock, fully believing, when grasped by an unknown and mysterious enemy, that he was lost.

Broquier had been watching most intently for any signs of the presence of the abductors of Dora Dale, and had been led to seek his perch on the tree stub, from the fact that the fall of the bottle convinced him, that those who had the young girl in their power were secreted among the branches of the towering timber.

He had discovered, however, no indications of their presence; but, in front of him, he had perceived a form that seemed to be approaching him.

He decided that Steve Speed was coming toward him, but he was confident that the young

Texan was not aware of his presence, and might pass him without his being discovered. However, he prepared himself for defense. As he had lost all trace of the scout, and in consequence had been greatly concerned, this more relieved than frightened him.

It seemed unreasonable to suppose that it was one of the abductors, and it was doubtful if any one besides Speed was in the vicinity.

Had he not been on the dead tree, and his whole form, as he believed, above the lower branches of the bushes, the count would not have felt so safe.

His interest and watchfulness were centered in his front, and he did not hear the approach of Bob Barr in his rear. Hence his astonishment, then he found himself seized, and flung into the river.

When he did collect his scattered ideas, Broquier had not the remotest doubt as to his assailant.

It could be none other than Stephen Speed. But who was the man—if it was a man—whom he had seen approaching him in front?

This was a puzzle to the count.

Steve had shot his horse, at the place where the abduction had occurred, when the former, as Broquier knew, could have killed him just as easily.

From that, and his recent act, the count felt persuaded that the scout had no thought of slaying him.

But, instead of being thankful for the forbearance of Steve, he became more and more furious, as he clung to the branch, still submerged to his shoulders.

He realized that, should young Speed rescue Dora while he remained thus in the river, all his trouble would have been for nothing, his plans frustrated!

He fairly ground his teeth with baffled revenge, and most insane rage. Only a few moments, however, did he thus occupy himself. Another startling and mysterious event quickly occurred.

An appalling yell of mortal terror drew the count's attention up the river, to the point from which he had been thrown; and he saw, dimly outlined in the rosy glow that pervaded the space between the lower boughs of the trees and the undergrowth, the figures of two men. The one was erect, and was holding the other at arm's length over his head.

This lasted but an instant; the next, the man was hurled, as he himself had been, down into the dark depths of the Rio Guadalupe.

Never had Broquier been more amazed in his life.

Who, in the fiend's name, was this second victim?

And who was the man who had thrown them both into the Guadalupe?

He now knew that it was not the young Texan, for he was much smaller in stature. There must, then, be others in the vicinity.

Who were they, and who was this who had been treated like himself?

These were puzzling questions.

The unknown shot from view, and then, to prove to the count that in one particular he had not been mistaken, Speed himself strode down the bank, directly to the spot where the unknown had, but a moment previous, been standing.

The young scout seemed to have been drawn to the spot by the shrieks of the last victim; and he peered down into the dark waters, evidently in doubt as to the sounds he had heard.

The appearance of Steve relieved the mind of Broquier; but the next moment he was as furious as before, by observing the scout dart in haste into the undergrowth. This looked to the count discouraging, for he reasoned that the unknown was not one of the abductors, who would undoubtedly now keep concealed. He must be a friend to this Speed, and probably was also on the trail to rescue Dora, having but recently arrived.

Greatly mystified, Broquier resolved to act promptly.

He now believed that Steve would join the unknown, and that Dora Dale would be rescued by them.

The time for action had arrived, and here he was, in the river, and losing time and opportunity.

So infuriated was the count, at the probability of his being balked in his scheme, that he quite forgot there was another man in the river.

Losing his hold on the branch, he now lunged forward into the middle of the stream; and swam with the current. It was quite dark on the river, the surface of the same being far below the general level of the land; and, as the Guadalupe flowed eastward, all was shrouded in gloom in front of Broquier. He could not even distinguish the water-line.

As he swam down-stream, his eyes bent to his right and upward, in an endeavor to discover a point where the bank was not so high, he suddenly recalled the fact that he had company in the waters—that is, if the man who had been flung into the river last had not been drowned.

However, there were no means of ascertaining the fact, and the count was not desirous to

have company in his next attempt to carry out his proposed plan.

He now endeavored to ascertain the nature of the bank near him. If it was shelving, he would make an effort to climb upward.

There was no time to lose.

Each moment Broquier became more furious. Soon, to his great relief, he gained a point which he considered favorable, and he drew himself, dripping, upon what seemed to be a narrow shelf of mud, the main bank being two feet beyond and almost perpendicular.

He had fancied, indeed he was almost positive, that he heard the heavy breathing of a man in front of him. This made him cautious, yet he hastened on his mission.

Well he knew that the man who had been hurled into the river, although perhaps an enemy to the scout, was no friend of his—for he had no friends. He, therefore, had no desire to be discovered.

Smearing with mud, the count stole along the narrow shelf, examining the bank with his hands, and soon reached a spot where, with much difficulty, he clambered upward. With a sigh of relief and a low snarl of exultation he rested upon his hands and knees, as he gained the upper level, panting laboriously. Then a slight sound caused him to shoot a glance to his left.

He saw a dark body rushing toward him; but before he could spring to his feet he was crushed to the earth, and held in the arms of a man.

Snarling like wild beasts, their limbs interlocked, they rolled over and over in fierce fight.

Count Broquier began to despair.

That his opponent had a blade ready to plunge into his vitals, he knew, for the cold steel had touched his cheek in the struggle.

Soon the unknown gained the advantage, bestrode him, and the count lay panting for breath, expecting instant death, and too exhausted to struggle more.

A heavy groan came from his lips.

"Groan onc't more, an' fer ther las' time, Dusky Dick, fer Satan tortur' me ef I doesn't split yer gizzard fer goin' back on me—a ole pard! Got ter be dang'd airy, ain't yer, since yer bes run with high-fly planters!"

"Cuss me, ef I w'u'dn't ha' choked ther breath outen yer carkiss ef I'd knowed yer tumbled inter ther drink arter slingin' me in!"

Even now, so intense was the amazement and terror of the count that he could not speak.

He lay limp and gasping for breath, the darkness preventing him from recognizing the man who claimed him as an old pard, and who believed him to have thrown him into the river. This man had now decided upon killing him.

It had been a day of strange and tragic occurrences, and the night promised well toward a continuance of them.

"Satan tortur' yer! Why doesn't yer say somethin'?" demanded the unknown, furiously. "Did yer think I'd drap in on yer an' claim my share o' rhino fer puttin' up ther job on ther ole cuss! Shute off yer tongue jist onc't, afore I sends yer off on ther whiz!"

A gasping sound issued from the throat of Broquier, as he strove to articulate. At last he called out, in a voice expressive of his terror:

"In the fiend's name, who are you? and why do you seek my life?"

"Wa-al, thet's purty cool an' cheeky, I'll swar! But hit's nat'ral fer yer ter act that-a-way. What did yer chuck me inter ther river fer, when I war p'intin' fer yer locate, ter git a gripet yer paw? Dog-gone ef I ain't wastin' time on yer, when I'm chuck-full o' biz."

"I swear I did not throw you into the river; I do not know who you are. I was hurled into the waters myself but a few moments before you were. I heard you yell when the ruffian launched you over the bank, and you must have heard me when I went over, for you could not have been far away."

"Again I ask, who are you? If I was not sure Lasso Lije was dead, I'd swear you were he, by your voice!"

If ever Broquier spoke sincerely in his life it was then; and Lije was forced to believe him.

"Lasso Lije air on top o' yer, an' a long ways from bein' dead, Dusky Dick! Ef hit warn't you what chucked me inter ther drink, jist tell me who hit war, an' I'll hash him, dead sure!"

"I don't know—I swear it! But let me up, and we'll soon find out. Is this really you, old pard? Pistol Pete told me that he saw you laid out cold at Laredo."

"Hit's me, all ther same, Dick, and in a purty tight box. Thar ain't no time ter gab. Me an' my pard hev stoled a gal up river, a' they're arter us. We must skute Grandee-wa ter onc't."

Instantly all was plain to the count.

Lasso Lije arose, and assisted him to his feet, Broquier exclaiming:

"So you have accidentally put your finger in my pie! That girl is to be my wife. She is the daughter of the man we put up the murder

job on, and I have nearly worked the plot to a point. Where's your pard?

"There's a regular devil of a Texan after you. This is too hot a place for us; we must get together and travel.

"I've been following your trail, Lije, without dreaming you were alive. Where's the girl?

"I say, I'll work another plan. I want revenge, as well as the girl, and I'll have it."

Just then the outcries of Major Dale, which sounded strangely to the two miscreants, rung through the timber.

"Satan tortur' me, ef thar ain't more ranchers arter us! Come on, Dick, an' 'splain things later. We've got nags nigh byer.

"Ther gal's safe in a tree, an' I reckon my pard, Bill Bowers, hev gi'n himself the bounce. He knowed my yelp, I reckon, an' 'lowed I'd gone up the spout.

"Come, we'll skute fer ther critters an' git!"

"Will they be able to find the girl, though? It will spoil all my plans if harm comes to her, Lije. We must have her taken back to her father and everything made smooth.

"You'll understand when I explain matters."

"Ya-as, they'll find her fast enough; fer I drap't a whisk' bottle down ther tree, an' hit smashed ter flinders, scatterin' 'sign' enough, yer jist kin bet. She's foun' by this time, I reckon!

"We must git, Dick, er we-'uns 'll be corraled an' h'isted up a limb. Dang' ef I ain't p'ison glad I run ag'in' yer! But I sw'af I'd ha' wiped yer out ef yer hedn't ha' told a plain story, an' spoke squar' fer on't.

"I war p'ison mad ter think yer'd throw off on me; an' I hed good reasons, as yer'll 'low when I 'splains 'em."

Five minutes after Broquier and Lasso Lije were mounted, the latter upon his own horse, and the count upon that of Bill Bowers.

Then they rode along, slowly and stealthily, in the direction of the belt of oaks.

They heard the voices of Major Dale and Bill, and perceiving the jeopardy of the outlaw, they resolved that they would rescue him—the fact that the horse of the old planter was near opening a way of escape for them all.

Having detected the presence of Steve Speed and the teamster, who were now searching the trees, and feeling sure that the captive girl would be found and taken back to the camp—also positive that they were doomed did they not make a hasty escape—they formed their plan, and as the reader knows, quickly executed the same.

The trio of villains dashed up the river, westward, amid the oak openings, and disappeared from view, leaving behind them three men and the captive maiden, and but one horse.

That was the animal that had been ridden by Steve, the Scout.

CHAPTER XV.

THE LOST FOUND.

STEVE and Bob hurried to the place where Bill Bowers had been captured as he slid down the grape-vine in his attempt to escape.

Bill had no doubt in his mind that Lije had been deceived in believing he recognized an old pard on the decayed tree, and he felt that this unknown man had slain Lije and flung him into the river. That Lije had killed one of his assailants, Bill was confident; forming this decision from having heard the cry of mortal terror which had preceded the yells of Lasso Lije.

Consequently, it was no wonder that when jerked from the jaws of death—from the mad clutch of Major Dale—he was dazed with the superstitious terror produced by beholding his pard, whom he had believed dead, and with him the mysterious stranger whom Lije had called Dusky Dick. The transformation was too sudden and amazing for Bill's benumbed faculties.

But to return to our friends.

No men ever set out upon a search with more determination to effect their purpose, or with more pity, sympathy and agonizing concern for the object of their search.

They had reasoned, with good grounds, that the maiden must be somewhere in the tree-tops; otherwise the abductor would not have been found, as he was, descending from the same.

Springing into the lower branches of the tree from which hung the grape-vine that Bill had used, both Steve and Bob quickly climbed upward, agreeing to keep some fifteen feet apart, and thus proceed in a parallel course toward the river.

Bob has his belief as to the position of Dora Dale, strengthened by recalling the fall of the bottle, which had for the time entirely slipped his mind. He now mentioned it to the young scout, who became more confident that they would succeed in their search.

But as the teamster had been some distance away, he could not decide as to the location of the tree from which the bottle fell. He judged it, however, to be between the dead stump and the spot at which Bill had been captured.

Bob had not said a word in regard to his discovery of the count, or in explanation of his

being on the trail, to Steve; for both had been from the time of their meeting, in constant action and deep anxiety. Besides this, he refrained from saying a word in connection with the recent occurrences in the presence of the old major, intending to make a confidant of Steve the first opportunity that offered.

All the curiosity and concern, born of hearing the cries and yells, had been banished from the mind of the young Texan through the anguish he felt in regard to poor Dora. His all-engrossing object was to discover and relieve her from the torture of mind and body which he felt confident she must be suffering.

On, over and through the huge moss-draped trees climbed Steve and Bob, searching carefully, and guided by the rays of silvery moonlight that shot downward. At times the young scout would halt and cry out, but not loudly for fear of betraying his own exact location.

"Dora, we are searching for you! Keep up heart, Dora! Your father is here."

Thus Steve would call, and then he and Bob would remain still and silent, listening intently. But all remained still.

The longed-for voice was not heard.

The silence was most discouraging, yet the two young men despaired not, but still went on.

They heard the furious words of the major, as he demanded of the captive outlaw the whereabouts of his lost child; and they had no fear that the miscreant would be rescued, or in any way escape.

Indeed, they were confident that there were no persons, except Dora and themselves, in the southern belt of timber that bordered the river.

Bob felt assured that the coward Broquier, did he escape drowning, would keep a safe distance; and the wretch, whom he had, later on, thrown into the river, would not for some time recover from his terror, and forced bath.

"Bob, this is terrible!" said Steve, at length; "we have passed that poor child, if she is in the line of trees through which we have come. We have searched closely, yet we must go over the ground again; and this time, nearer to the upper branches. For Heaven's sake, Bob, return to Major Dale, and find out what information he may have forced from that captive ruffian!"

"If you did not kill the one you hurled into the river, I'll run him to his hole. But the wretches must swing. I swear it!"

"I'll go, pard Steve, an' lively: but, fust off, I'll tell you thet ther cussed count struck out arter yer, es soon es yer tuck ther trail.

"Thet's why I'm byer. I knowed he war arter yer, ter plug a bullet in yer brain, ef he gut a show. Does yer see thet dead tree stump?"

Steve gazed toward it, but did not answer.

The teamster continued:

"Wa-al, I jerked ther count offen thet stump, when he war layin' fer yer, an' I slung his car-kiss inter the river. He jist squealed like a skeered ole woman—dang'd ef he didn't, an' I reckon yer must ha' heard him!"

"Bob, you are a brick! You astonish me! So the scoundrel followed me, did he? Well, the next time I shoot in his direction, I don't think I'll aim at his horse. You must be right; he sought revenge, and might have scooped me in out of the dew, if you hadn't been on the watch.

"I owe you one for this, Bob; and I'll not forget it you'll see!"

"Thet's all hunk, pard! All I'm worritated 'bout, outside o' Miss Dora, air 'cos I didn't job my knife inter him, an' settle ther biz.

"Ef I'd know'd what I did a leetle time arter, I'd ha' did hit, dead sure an' sartain, Steve.

"Ther last creepin' Kiote what I chucked inter ther drink war p'intin' fer thet stump, an' I nailed him. When I cotched a bolt o' him, he thought I war ther count, I reckon; an' I opines he's a ole pard o' ther count in deviltry."

"What makes you think so, Bob?"

"Fer a mighty good reason. He sung out, when I grabbed him: 'Dang yer, Dusky Dick, not so fast! I'm Lasso Lije, yer ole pard.'

"Thet's what ther cuss spit out, an' I'd like ter know what more yer kin make o' hit."

"I believe, Bob, you have struck an important clew; very important to me, for I have vowed that I will ferret out the mysterious influence, which this Broquier holds over Major Dale.

"You and I must work this thing secretly. Tell no one what you have just told to me. The count is a cowardly villain, I am aware; and, if I am not greatly mistaken, a criminal. He is now, I have no doubt, in disguise, and has assumed the title and character he bears.

"But, we must not linger in this way. Hurry, Bob, and if that wretch has not revealed the place where he has hidden Miss Dora, let me know at once, and we'll find a way to force him."

"I'm off, pard Steve! Keep yer peepers open!"

So saying, the teamster disappeared down the tree.

Steve Speed clambered still higher than he had previously mounted, scanning eagerly each part of tangled vines and bunch of moss.

And, not twenty feet above where the young scout and Bob Barr had halted, discouraged, and conversed for a few moments, as recorded, was Dora Dale.

The suffering maiden was indeed, as Steve believed, enduring the torture of the lost. She had heard the approach of her friends, and had listened intently to every sound that betrayed their presence; and she was almost overcome with joy, as she realized that they were approaching her.

She heard, also, the furious cries of her poor father, and wondered what it all could mean.

What could be the difficulty?

Had the poor old man gone insane with grief and anguish? His wild and extravagant outcries seemed to indicate that he had.

But it was a consolation to Dora to know that they were all striving to rescue her—that her father and Bob had followed the outlaws, as well as had the young scout.

She felt confident that her father would not be so excited and furious, when he should know that his daughter was safe.

No language could express the despair of poor Dora, when she found that Steve Speed and Bob Barr, though they had been directly beneath her, had become disheartened. Would they leave the tree, in the top of which she lay bound, and incapable of speech or motion, and leave her to the terrible fate of which she dared not, for a moment, think? Again she listened.

Great was her amazement, to hear Bob mention the name of Dusky Dick. She knew that one of her captors had recognized a man in the undergrowth, as an old friend, by that name; and, from the words of the teamster, she now understood that Dusky Dick and Count Biron Broquier were one and the same person!

She had felt sure, indeed she had no doubt in her mind, that the man, who had some time previous formed the acquaintance of her father, and in some way had gained a powerful influence over him, was a treacherous villain.

That Count Broquier had deep designs upon her father, that he was endeavoring by every possible means to frighten him into influencing herself in his favor as a suitor for her hand—that a marriage with her was his ultimate object, Dora Dale was confident. However, she had not before this thought that the count could be so low in crime, so depraved, as previously to have mingled with, as confederates, such miscreants as her captors.

Those wretches had signified their intention to leave her, thus bound and gagged, if danger threatened them too closely, and they had already done so. Was it possible that the count could be leagued with such inhuman monsters?

This, judging from their words, could not be. But was it possible, indeed probable, that Broquier and Lasso Lije, both of whom had been thrown into the river by Bob Barr, as the latter had stated—which explained to Dora the fearful shrieks she had heard—was it not probable that the two would meet, and endeavor to carry her off?

This would, should they escape from the river, be comparatively an easy matter for them to accomplish.

Again a hopeless despair settled down upon the suffering maiden, but from it she was providentially relieved by the departure of Bob and the upward climbing of Steve Speed.

Muttering to himself, the young scout neared the spot where, faint and helpless, lay poor Dora, her mind a mazy whirl of hopes and fears.

Was it the mysterious, subtle influence of her presence that caused such a strange feeling to fill his brain?

Certainly there was a singular fascination, a strong and unaccountable attraction, to climb higher, although there appeared to be no hiding-place at such a height, for the reason that there were now fewer limbs and less foliage.

Up he went, panting from exertion, until he stood upon a limb directly below the place where the young girl reclined.

He placed his foot upon a smaller branch and then sprung upward, catching at the limb over his head; but with an outcry of horror he sunk backward, only saving himself from falling headlong to the earth by clutching the bough upon which he stood.

Panting for breath, Steve clung to the limb for a moment, trembling in every nerve.

So intense was the strain upon poor Dora, so terrible her anxiety and the awful emotions that ruled her, fearing that the scout would pass her and never on earth be so near to her again—so intense was this strain that the maiden's brow was covered with beads of cold perspiration, and her face was like that of a corpse!

And Steve Speed had placed his hand directly upon that cold face, withdrawing the same on the instant, in horror.

He knew that his mission was at an end. He had found Dora Dale, but he believed that he had found her dead!

Her silence, then, was explained.

A corpse could not respond to her name. The miscreants had murdered her!

Thus reasoning, and trembling from head to foot, barely able to keep his position on the limb—thus was Steve, the Scout.

But who shall describe the feelings of poor Dora, at that terrible moment?

She understood the cause of Steve's movement, and his moans of grief and horror.

She knew that he would rally, and that she was saved; but the consciousness of his anguish was dreadful to her.

Suddenly the scout sprung upward tearing at the boughs, and stood over what he firmly believed to be the corpse of Dora Dale.

There she lay, bound and gagged, and secured to the huge limb; a bar of silvery moonlight kissing her pale, cold face, and playing over her glistening eyes—eyes, so filled with relief, and joy, and love, so expressive of soul-felt emotions, as caused Steve to call out on the instant, as he severed the cruel gag:

"Oh, Dora! Dora! My poor darling!"

In another moment she was free, and the next was folded to the breast of Steve, the Scout!

Slowly and feebly, the benumbed arms of Dora Dale stole tremblingly upward, her fingers stealing through the dark-brown hair which hung over the young Texan's shoulders; the moonlight revealing the livid marks, left by the cruel cords, around the wrists of the tortured girl!

"May Heaven bless and reward you, Steve!"

Faintly, and in a zephyr-like whisper came these words from the maiden's lips.

Closer the strong, sinewy arms of the young scout pressed her to his breast; he trembling with the intensity of his emotions.

In after days Dora Dale recalled the fact, that tears fell upon her cheek—tears of sympathy, of pity, born of the realization of what that innocent and delicate maiden must have suffered while a captive.

At that moment, a far-sounding yell rung through the timber from the oak belt.

Steve knew that it came from Bob Barr, and that it was a signal of danger, or of warning.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE OLD, OLD STORY.

At Bob's yell, Dora started convulsively. She knew, as well as the scout did, what it indicated.

It was no wonder, then, that she was affrighted.

"Fear nothing," said Steve, all his weakness vanishing, in a new and stronger thirst for revenge.

His eyes flashed amid the dark shades.

Stampede Steve was himself again.

"Now, hear me," he said, removing his sombrero, and raising his hand on high; "here, in the dark solitudes of these moss-draped trees, holding in my arms one who has been so wronged by a brace of villains, and who is still in danger from the plots of a third—here I swear, by my hopes of Heaven, to protect Dora Dale from those who would insult or injure her, and to most terribly avenge her for all that she has already suffered!"

Strong and clear were these rapidly spoken words, and without any show of excitement.

Then he replaced his sombrero upon his head, and addressed the fair girl, who clung to him, as though he was her only hope.

"Dora darling, if you will permit me to call you so, this is perhaps the only occasion, for some time, on which we shall be by ourselves; and I must speak the thoughts that are uppermost in my mind and heart.

"I have been providentially guided to you. We met providentially in the first place, and at first sight my whole heart went out to you. I love you, Dora Dale, more than all the world—more than I can possibly express!"

"Since you, through my negligence have been in the power of those vile wretches, I have suffered ten thousand deaths. I know that you have endured more torture than any one can conceive of; and that you should, at once, be taken to camp, to be cared for; but I wish, first, to hear one word from your lips.

"I ask but little, and that little is—may I be your trusted friend? Rough scout as I am, may I hope that you will not consider yourself as disgracing your name, and station in society, by recognizing me as one in whom you can confide?"

Dora drew herself up higher, and clung more closely about Steve's neck, as she replied:

"Stephen Speed, I have loved you from the moment I first saw and realized that you had saved me from a horrible death. This is the second time that you have rescued me.

"I am yours, Steve, now, and forever, and without reserve. I am yours, wholly, not from gratitude, but because I love you!"

"Heaven bless you, Dora, for those words! Come, I can conquer the world now. I have been selfish to keep you here so long.

"Here hangs a lariat—the same, I presume, that those dastards made use of in drawing you up hither. I'll fix it about you in such a way that you will be as easy as if swinging in a hammock.

"How Bob Barr will be rejoiced. But I forgot that yell of his. What in the name of wonder can have happened now?"

"Oh, Steve, I shall die if I am forced to pass through any more horrors! I do hope and pray, that I may be spared from experiencing any such terrors and hopeless despair."

"Trust in me, Dora. I'll not leave you again, and woe to any who would bar our way!"

"I feel the strength of a dozen men in me, and it will be a black day for those cowardly villains, when I meet them, which I trust will be soon.

"Down you go, my darling! Don't be afraid; I have the end of the lariat around my waist."

With the greatest possible care, the young scout lowered the long-suffering maiden downward, until she swung free. Then he followed, going from limb to limb.

Soon he leaped to the earth, as if fearful that his prize would vanish; then detaching the lariat from her form and from his own waist, he gathered Dora in his strong arms, and strode through the timber. At length, he broke free from the undergrowth, into the oak belt.

There, kneeling in the grass, was Bob Barr, but neither Major Dale nor his horse could be seen.

The teamster, as soon as he perceived Steve, and saw that Dora was with him, sprang up, throwing his sombrero in the air in his exultation.

From this manifestation, the scout concluded that nothing disastrous had occurred, neither did any serious danger threaten them.

"Rah fer Stampede Steve!" said Bob, rushing forward, while at the same time, the young Texan saw the major rise to a sitting posture from the grass.

"What has happened, Bob? Why did you give that yell, and where is the major's horse? I do not understand this. What has been going on?"

"Wait until I gits a squar' peep et Miss Dora," was the reply; "an' knows she's all O. K. But, I reckon thar'd be some purty big thunder-clou is outer yer face, pard, ef she warn't."

Dora held out her hand to Bob Barr, as the latter rushed eagerly up to Steve's side, delighted at seeing her alive and bright, and with the same kind manner and grateful expression, as of old.

"Dog-gone my ole heart, Miss Dora!" exclaimed Bob, impulsively; "ef yer kin half understand what a powerful 'mount of indig' I hes bin through since yer war tuck! But me an' Steve'll git even on ther deal w' ther bellyuns, though they come purty nigh sweepin' ther board, an' tuck ther last trick!"

"What do you mean?" demanded Steve; "and what has happened to Major Dale, that he acts so strangely?"

"Ther major air all hunk, er will be purty soon. We've hed a leetle more hellishness sprinkled outer us. Ther cuss we-uns captured gut away on ther major's boss, arter knockin' ther ole man on ther head. When I foun' him, I thought he war dead gone; an' thet's what I gi'n thet yelp fer. Howsomever, I brought him most roun' ter biz, though his idees air on a gin'ral stampede till yit."

Before the teamster had ceased speaking, the scout started toward the major, as Dora gave vent to a cry of anguish and concern.

"Put Miss Dora inter his lap, Steve! Thet'll fotch him 'roun', I reckon, better'n anythin'."

"I hed ter skute ter ther river fer a canteen o' water and wash his cabase off; but I come back ag'in purty rapid, fer hit struck me sudint like, thet arter ther way things hes worked outer this hyer trail, ther major wouldn't be hyer when I roved back. But he lay thar, stiff as a wagon-tongue."

"I swar I war 'bout lunified, fer I left yer in ther trees, 'bout bu'sted o' ther hope o' findin' Miss Dora, an' ther condemned cuss what we-uns spected ter squeeze out her locate from, hed levanted."

It was very evident that Bob was so rejoiced at the rescue of Miss Dora, and the recovery of his employer, that he felt obliged to express his joy in words of some kind; an explanation of matters being by him considered on the correct section of the programme about that time.

Neither Steve nor Dora realized what the teamster was talking about. Their whole attention was centered upon the major, who sat gazing at them as they approached with a vacant stare, his long gray hair all saturated with water and blood.

"Oh, papa!" cried out the young girl, in an agony of apprehension, "oh, what a terrible day and night this has been! Will these dreadful experiences never end?"

"All is progressing favorably, Dora darling," returned Steve. "We ought to be very thankful that your father has escaped death at the hands of that miscreant, and that you are free from their power."

"Ob, yes! I know we ought," said the maiden; "but it is awful. Poor papa! Poor, dear papa!"

Steve placed Dora in her father's lap, and the poor girl clasped her arms about his neck, while the tears rained down her pale cheeks.

Almost instantly it seemed that Major Dale regained his natural state of mind, upon hearing his daughter's voice; for, with a loud cry of joy, he wound his arms about his recov-

ered treasure, and their tears of thankfulness mingled.

Steve Speed turned to the teamster, leaving the father and his child together, and said:

"Now, pard, explain! What in thunder has been going on here? How did that villain escape?"

"Wa-al, Steve, I knows jist 'bout es much es yer does yerself. I hain't hed time ter look fer 'sign,' but hyer hit air, plain es A, B, C."

As he spoke, Bob Barr picked up from the grass the severed bonds that had been about the arms and legs of Bill Bowers; his eyes and face expressing the utmost amazement, as he continued:

"Dog-gone my heart, ef ther cuss warn't cut loose: an' he c'u'dn't ha' did hit hisself!"

"Does yer s'pose ther major gut lunified, an' so full o' fight, on 'count o' thinkin' 'bout how ther hellyun hed tuck Miss Dora, thet he slashed him loose a-purpos' ter fight him?"

"Yer know we heerd curious yelps from ther major, arter we-uns gut up inter ther trees."

Before Bob had more than half-finished, the young scout was moving around here and there, at times upon his knees, his face close to the ground, and in such a position as not to shade the point he was examining from the moon.

Suddenly he sprung to his feet, in astonishment.

"Wa-al, Steve, what yer foun'?" asked Bob.

"If you go where those two demons left their horses, Bob, you'll find that the animals are not there. But, wait a moment! I'll examine the 'sign' beyond the place where the major's horse was staked."

"Dang ef thet ain't dub'ous!" burst out the teamster, in anger and disappointment. "Hyar, I've bin countin' on ridin' one o' ther critters back ter camp, an' Miss Dora takin' t'other! Now, we-uns hev all gut ter ride on Shanks' mare."

"Cuss it, Steve, mebbe so they've tuk your nag too; an' thet'll be a purty kittle o' fish!"

"We're all afoot ef they hev, an' Miss Dora'll hev ter be kerried in yer arms. But I don't reckon thet'll sot yer back a great heft."

The scout now walked forward a few paces, and then returned to his pard's side, indicating that he wished to converse privately.

The pair therefore sauntered from the immediate vicinity of Major Dale and his daughter, who still remained in the same position; clasping each other, as if dreading another separation.

"Bob," said Steve, in a low voice, "the two men whom you threw into the river escaped. They met, and recognized each other as pards. Then they mounted the two horses, which had been left in the 'open,' and rode through the timber, to the point nearest to where your captive lay."

"That outlaw was a pard of at least one of them. Then they dashed from the undergrowth, knocked the major senseless, cut the captive free, placed him upon Major Dale's horse, and struck up the river. That's it, you may depend."

"The two abductors, with Count Broquier—your Dusky Dick—are, about this time, going it pretty lively, through the oaks together, up the river."

"Your surmise was correct. Count Broquier has been, in the past, known to at least one of these miscreants; and he is now confederating with them to form a plot of revenge. But you and I will fix their flints yet, or lose a leg."

The teamster was silent for some seconds.

At length, he broke out, in astonishment and self-condemnation:

"Wa-al, I'll jist be dang'd! I war a born idjit, not ter ha' jabbed my stickter inter both ther cusses, when I hed a chance."

"Ye're jist kerrect, all through; an' thar's ther ole boy ter pay, ahead, dead sure!"

"Mebbe so they've skuted up the river, ter crawl inter our camp, an' raise merry ole Ned!"

"I don't think so," said the scout. "They dare not attempt such a thing as that. They have all they can attend to, you may be sure, to keep from being corraled by us. But, we shall see."

"We'll still hunt them, after we get the major and Miss Dora to camp. But, there it is—only my horse left!"

"Well, the young lady can ride the animal, and you and I and the major must walk. I'll get my nag at once."

"Ye're mighty right all 'roun', pard," returned the teamster; "I sot things up, ther same sort o' way. But, say, Steve, they may be a-layin' fer we-uns on ther way—what yer think?"

The last idea was expressed, after the young scout had gone to bring his horse; the words seeming to be the expression of a sudden thought, which gave Bob Barr much apprehension, as he glanced toward Dora.

In fifteen minutes more, that young lady was mounted upon the scout's horse, and her father, Steve, and Bob, as rear scouts. The trio, on foot, escorted the fair girl toward the camp, over the same trail that she had been but the morning previous; but then, borne senseless in the arms of the outlaw, Lasso Lije.

CHAPTER XVII.

BACK TO THE CAMP.

A MOMENT or two's conversation passed between Steve and Bob, the former impressing upon the latter the importance of secrecy in regard to the connection of Count Broquier with the occurrences of the evening. It was agreed between them, not to acknowledge having seen the count, or detected his presence near the spot where Dora had been found, and rescued.

It was probable, that Broquier, having so much at stake, and believing that his presence had not been observed by those who were in search of the abducted maiden, would return to camp, and continue on with the train; awaiting an opportunity to carry out his plans, or, with the help of his new allies—if all other means failed—to again abduct Dora, and bear her away to some distant point, where he would have matters all his own way.

Steve reasoned, that the count would, before parting with his new-found pards, either dispatch them for more of their own lawless companions, or order them to follow the wagon-train, avoiding observation. The ruffian could arrange certain signals between them, for meeting.

Strange to say, the major did not once speak of the count. He seemed to have forgotten that the latter had started down the river from the ford, and that Bob Barr had set out to follow him.

In fact, the old planter appeared to have been so demoralized by the anxiety and suffering he had gone through that he acted quite strangely and wild. He was even unnaturally affectionate and concerned in regard to Dora's comfort and safety, his every thought and attention seeming bent upon the welfare of his daughter.

The young scout impressed upon Dora, also, the necessity of concealing what they had discovered of Broquier's presence on the trail, and his evident intimacy with the abductors; explaining, to both her and Bob, that strict silence and secret investigation and watchfulness were necessary to be maintained, in order that they might ascertain the nature of the influence and power the count held over Major Dale.

This understanding was effected by a very brief consultation, a few words sufficing between the parties concerned.

Since the startling occurrences of the day just past, Steve felt assured that, no matter how Broquier might act, the major would refuse to proceed with the train unless he consented to act as guide. But the young scout had his own plans in regard to this matter, as will be shown.

Little anxiety did either Steve or Bob feel as to their being molested by the three miscreants.

That these ruffians had left the oak-belt and struck out upon the open plain, riding abreast, and leaving a very noticeable trail in the dew-laden grass, did not deceive the scout, or the teamster either. Both were confident that the count and his new-found confederates would again enter the timber, beyond the point where Dora had been abducted.

The gray streaks eastward heralded the coming morn as our friends reached the south approach to the ford; and Dora Dale immediately urged the horse of the young scout, upon which she rode, into the ford and through it, in order to dispatch some of the teamsters with animals, to enable her father and friends to cross the stream.

They were indeed greatly worn and fatigued, from their not being accustomed to traveling on foot. They saw Dora disappear within the towering timber on the further side of the river, and then heard the loud challenge of the guard. This was followed by a wild and joyful yell, which awoke the echoes of the Rio Guadalupe.

After that the camp was evidently in a tumult, caused by the young girl's safe return.

Soon three horses, held in lead by a mounted man, were seen dashing down the northern approach to, and into the ford, the rider waving his sombrero in the air in joyous salutation to the weary travelers. In five minutes more they were riding into camp, the same being brightly illuminated, as dry brush and wood had been cast upon the smoldering fires.

As the major, with Steve and Bob, rode into the camp, another series of cheers rung out, and many rushed to greet them and welcome their return.

Our friends saw that Dora still sat the horse of the scout, the center of a crowd of women and children, and they urged their animals toward her, shaking hands with emigrants and teamsters, who flocked around them.

Barely had they reached the vicinity of the women and children when a loud shout from the guard, who had been stationed near the ford, attracted general attention, and Dora rode up just as they whirled their horses about.

Exclamations of mingled surprise and merriment filled the air, followed by uproarious laughter. Major Dale turned pale as death, and the others exchanged significant glances, Dora appearing to be frightened, and riding up closer to her father and the young scout.

That which now met the eyes of all was indeed a comical sight.

It was Count Biron Broquier, his hat gone, and his garments dripping with water, torn to rags and bedraggled with mud.

His long hair was clinging about his head and neck, and his features expressed great indignation, rebuke, and the utmost fatigue.

The count, as he now staggered along, was a most pitiable object to behold.

"Dusky Dick does not make a very favorable appearance," said Steve Speed, in a low tone to Dora; "but we must admit he has gotten himself up well for the occasion. The stage has lost a star. He could play the low villain to perfection, just as he stands."

"What audacity!" returned the young girl. "I did not dream of his daring to re-enter the camp."

"A man would dare anything for such a prize as he hopes to win!" said Steve, gazing into Dora's face significantly.

The maiden blushed crimson as she returned; "He has built his hopes on shifting sand."

"And he hasn't got 'sand' to back him up," retorted the young Texan, quickly.

"Do look at papa!" said Dora; "oh, how I pity him! How I do pray that this mystery may be cleared up, and that he may again enjoy that contentment, peace and happiness, which have never been his since Count Broquier crossed his path."

"Watch the villain, Dora," directed Steve, "his face and words will be a study. You can see what a consummate hypocrite he is—how apt in deceit! Your father is truly in a most lamentable state of mind; but that ruffian shall not hold power over him for any great length of time. I'll watch him and his villainous associates."

The whispered conversation of the two here ceased as the count came nearer them.

Waving his hand in general salutation the scoundrel called out as he came up:

"Thank the Fates, I have got back to camp at last, and find you also returned in safety! How rejoiced I am that you have been successful in your mission!"

"Miss Dora, I congratulate you upon your rescue from those miscreants, and only regret that I was not so favored as to be one of those who gallantly followed the villains, and I trust shot them, as they deserved."

"I assure you, my friends, I have done all in my power. I have had a weary tramp, got lost, and fell into the river; besides having, since, been obliged to swim the stream."

"When I first started, my horse fell, and threw me to the earth. I must have been stunned partially, and in a semi-unconscious state crawled, a long distance, in the grass and weeds, tearing through the undergrowth. I hope my horse has returned to camp."

"Thank Heaven! I can again lie down in peace, and rest. It has been a terrible day and night to me—wandering aimlessly, lost, and famishing for food. I am so rejoiced that you are all safe, and especially Miss Dora."

"But, excuse me! I must change my attire, procure food, and then sleep; for I am nearly dead."

Major Dale believed almost every word that had been spoken by Broquier; indeed it was all quite reasonable to him, with the exception of that portion of his narrative, in which he spoke of his fall from his horse.

Bob Barr was the most astonished man in the camp; although he had been, in a measure, prepared for this scene by Steve, the Scout.

Such audacious lying fairly dumfounded the teamster, and added to his contempt and detestation for the dusky villain.

Poor Dora, worn and weak as she was, shuddered when the snake-like eyes of Broquier shot a glance toward her.

The major alighted from his horse, and directed a negro woman to prepare some food immediately, for the count.

Steve, too, dismounted, and quickly assisted the young girl to the ground, whispering in her ear:

"Fear not, my darling! Remember that, now, and from this on, one who loves you more than life, is continually guarding you from all harm."

"That ruffian played his part well. He was very cunning to advance the idea, that his head had been injured by the fall from his horse; and then pretending to believe that the animal stumbled and fell with him. But the strangest thing of all, was the fact, that he appeared not to have seen me at all, though he looked directly at me."

"He is playing a deep game, a most desperate game, to brave death, as he is doing, by returning to camp. However, as he is not aware that any of us know of his being down the river, and had concocted a plausible story to cover the humiliation he received at my hands, his return is not so strange after all."

"But, now, my dear Dora, you must go, and seek food and rest. Fear nothing, for I am now guide of this train!"

"I am thankful it is so," was the reply. "I can now sleep in peace, without apprehension."

These words were spoken hastily, the scout

clasping Dora's hand, without being observed by others.

The horses were soon cared for, and as the women had hastened to prepare food for their returned friend, after the excitement of welcoming them had calmed down, all were soon enjoying a hearty meal, well relished as may be supposed.

The old planter kept near his daughter, as if fearing she might be spirited away from him; and it was very evident to Steve, Dora and Bob, that the return of Broquier had affected the major strangely. He seemed to be astounded at the unusual humility of the count, from the fact that the latter had feigned to be ignorant that Steve had shot his horse; and he had also shown no signs of being offended at the presence of the young scout. This was decidedly unnatural.

It was plain that Major Dale was more concerned and suspicious of Broquier, in his assumed humble manner, than if the count had entered the camp furious with rage.

As the sun peeped above the horizon, the mules were driven to graze, and Dora and her father retired to their respective wagons to rest, it having been decided that the train should not start until after the sun had passed the meridian some hours.

Previous to retiring, Major Dale introduced Steve to the entire party as the guide of the train, and the scout was, in a very short time, on familiar terms with every man, woman and child, and he was regarded with kindness, respect and trust.

His fine form and handsome face, coupled with his graceful presence and cheerful manner, claimed the attention and admiration of all. Especially was this the case when his services to Dora were considered.

Some surprise was expressed that the count did not make his appearance after entering the wagon, where he gave orders that the negro woman should bring him his food.

The young scout, however, did not think this by any means strange; neither did Dora, nor Bob Barr. But Major Dale had cast nervous glances quite frequently, while eating, toward the wagon which Broquier had entered to change his wet garments.

It almost seemed as if the old planter expected and dreaded the coming of the man, who, his best friends could not but perceive, held some mysterious power, or strange influence, over him.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN CONSULTATION.

STEVE, the scout, in perhaps an hour after the retiring of the major and his daughter, bade Bob keep an eye upon the wagon in which Count Broquier had ensconced himself; as he purposed taking his horse to better grass, on the opposite side of the river.

To the teamster, the object of the young scout was plainly evident, and he advised the latter to keep a good lookout for lurking assassins; a piece of advice that was wholly unnecessary, as Bob well knew, but he wished his pard to know that he was deeply interested in his welfare.

Half an hour afterward, Steve was at the place where he had met his fate; although he had left his horse near the ford, staked to good grass.

He had more than one object in view, as will be seen.

First, in a dexterous manner, he removed the hide from the steer, rolled it into a compact bundle, and carried it to the vicinity of his horse, where he left it. He then returned, passed beyond the carcass of the steer, and struck through the oaks toward the west, and parallel with the river; examining every inch of ground, as he passed over it, with keen gaze.

He had proceeded, in this way, perhaps half a mile, when, with an ejaculation of great satisfaction, he halted.

Directly in front of him, was the plain trail of three horses, that had passed toward the river from the plain; the hoofs of the animals having brushed the dew from the grass, the trail being plainly seen for a long distance.

Casting his carbine into the hollow of his left arm, the weapon at full cock, Steve, in long strides, followed the trail toward the river.

He slackened not his speed until near the dark shades, when he made a detour, and entered the timber further east.

With the most stealthy movements, the scout then advanced through the undergrowth to a point where the trail had entered the same; soon reaching plain "sign," which he followed, with every sense strained.

The trail soon entered a denser portion of the thickets, and Steve found himself, in a very short time, in a small "open," where there were many evidences to show that the count and the two outlaws had halted, and remained for a considerable time.

He wished, most earnestly, that he had been in the vicinity when the miscreants were there.

Witness doubt he might then have learned much of the mystery in connection with Count Broquier, or Dusky Dick and his outlaw pards.

But much was to be learned from the trail,

and the young scout lost no time; soon finding the point where Lije and Bill had departed, leading the horse of the major, which they had stolen—the count going on foot, in the direction of the river and the camp.

This discovery gave Steve much gratification, and he followed the horse trail, until convinced that the two villains had gone toward the south, over the open plain. That a plot had been formed, by Broquier, to capture the train, the young Texan was confident.

The count had made up his mind that, with such a man as the scout in their company, it would be no easy matter to gain the hand of Dora Dale by threats and through the influence he had obtained over the old planter.

Thus reasoned Stampede Steve.

Consequently, Broquier had determined, since he had found two unscrupulous confederates who were well posted as to the lay of the land on the intended course of Major Dale, and also acquainted with the lawless element of the border, to take by force all that he had at first plotted to gain through his power over the major.

That the two miscreants had been dispatched by the count to get the assistance of some band of outlaws to capture the train, when it should arrive on the unsettled frontier, Steve was confident.

Satisfied in this respect, he returned to the "open" and took up the trail of Broquier, as the latter had proceeded toward the river with the intention of entering the camp.

But a short distance had he gone when he saw a white object in the grass, and picking it up, found it to be a crumpled paper. It was stained very much, and had the appearance of having been in a water-saturated pocket.

Opening this paper with care, Steve gave a cry of amazement. It contained writing, and the first words that caught his eye was the name, "Duncan Dale." He felt sure that it was the signature of the old planter, and smoothing out the paper, the young man read as follows:

"DALE PLANTATION, June 6th, 185-.

"This is to certify that I pay the sum of five thousand dollars (\$5,000) to Count Biron Broquier, as a bribe, to induce him not to reveal a secret which, if made public, would disgrace me and my family, as well as condemn me to an ignominious death.

"(Signed.)

DUNCAN DALE."

Steve Speed was perfectly astounded upon reading this most singular and criminating document, relating to a man whom he had believed to be the soul of honor.

Had the scout found this paper previous to his having met Dora Dale—even though he had known the major—he would have felt interest in it. He might have made up his mind that there were good reasons for shunning such a man; in fact, he would have felt pretty positive that the old planter had committed some heinous crime.

But as his feelings toward Dora were now—though he saw this written acknowledgment of some capital crime—Steve's one thought was, that it was providential the paper had fallen into his hands. Major Dale, he believed, had been forced to write and sign it, and by none other than Count Broquier.

Had he not already known that the count held great power over the planter, and also possessing the knowledge that he did of the base character of the former, Steve might have been convinced that Major Dale was a criminal, who merited death by hanging.

But as the young scout reviewed the late scenes, he could not but feel confident that the major was an innocent man—an honorable man, guilty of no crime, but who had, in some mysterious manner been the victim of Broquier—thus placed in a position where he was liable to be convicted of some base and cowardly crime. All this had been done to forward the pre-arranged plot of this villain, to gain the hand and fortune of the daughter, the father being forced to favor the suit, through fear of being accused and convicted of capital crime.

The wording of the document proved beyond a doubt that the count held the old major in his power to an alarming extent. Had this not been so, the latter would never have executed such a criminating instrument.

Thankful, indeed, was Steve that the paper had fallen into his hands.

The question now was, did Broquier hold another such document?

Had he forced more than the sum therein designated from Major Dale?

It did not seem possible that such could be the case, as the document was dated but a month previous.

Why, after receiving such an amount, did this wretch still persecute the old man, and endeavor to force him to bestow the hand of his daughter upon him?

Steve's mind was busy.

He had sworn that he would defeat all the plans of Count Broquier, and he meant to keep that oath to the letter.

It really seemed that he had been providentially guided, not only on a trail that had enabled him to save the life of a most lovely girl, but also to right a great wrong.

Even the finding of so important a paper was not a little strange and providential, and strengthened the belief of the scout that he had been destined to defeat the scoundrel's villainy.

Steve felt that it would not be prudent to show the document to either Dora or the teamster, although he well knew that damaging to the major as were the contents, they would not for a moment entertain the faintest suspicion in regard to the one they so honored.

It was no longer strange to the young man that Major Dale should have acted as he did, or allowed such a villain to form, as it were, one of his family. Indeed, there was no favor under the circumstances that he could withhold from Broquier, inasmuch as he had put himself entirely in his power, and that in black and white.

Steve believed that he now understood what had so changed the manner of the count, transforming him from an insolent and domineering ruffian, with bravado in every word and motion, to a cringing coward in manner and expression.

He had lost the paper, which had constituted the greater part of his power over the major. Hence he was in a most discouraged frame of mind, which must have been doubly prostrating to him, had he not formed hopes of success, through the plot just formed with Lije and Bill.

Placing the document carefully in his pouch, Steve strode onward; when he became convinced of the truth of his reasonings in regard to Broquier's despondency, for, back and forth from the river-bank for quite a distance, he knew that the miscreant, had come and gone, seeking what he had lost. The "sign" plainly proved this.

The young scout had learned enough, and he proceeded down the river to his horse.

He had just gotten far enough into the mysteries of the case in hand, to feel in a great worry unless he was gathering new evidence, and fresh points in the detective line.

Yet he felt that he could not expect to accomplish much more, in the way of clearing up the mystery, for some time to come.

It was wonderful, however, what he had already done. It had changed his whole life, and aims, and hopes.

Had any one predicted such a chain of events, so important to himself, thirty-six hours previous, he would have looked on him as a madman.

Would it benefit him in any way, were he to confer with Major Dale?

Would it be the means of relieving the mind of the old planter, to know that Broquier had no longer the document that so vitally concerned him?

Should he inform his new employer of the danger ahead on the trail, at once, or should he wait?

These questions puzzled Steve Speed, and he was in a deep study when he returned to camp.

Purposely he rode directly to, and passed the end of the wagon, into which Broquier had gone.

Gazing through, where the tilt was not closely drawn, Steve discovered the ruffian in a death-like slumber—a slumber, which the scout resolved should be more death-like still, before another moon had waned.

When, staking his horse, Bob Barr came forward, patting the animal as he asked:

"Wa-al, pard, anythin' new over ther drink?"

"I've found the trail, Bob! Those two fiends have galloped south, with the major's horse in lead."

"What d'ye make o' thet, Steve?"

"I don't think we've seen the last of them, by a long shot," was the reply.

"They'll hev company, when they nex' glide in on we-uns. Thet air my opine on ther sub'je'."

"It coincides with mine to a dot, Bob!"

"I c'ud chaw my years off with pure mad, when I think what a idjit, I war, not ter hev knifed both, 'fore I slung 'em inter ther drink!"

"Ef I hed, all would ha' bin smooth an' lovely. But, dang my heart! ef we won't gi'n 'em a lively ole fandango when we gits a show at 'em ag'in; an', es fer ther cuss in ther wagon—count, er Dusty Dick, I doesn't keer what he calls hisself—dog-gone me, ef I doesn't think hit's sorter risky givin' him free range."

"I goes in fer stringin' ther bellyun up, afore he cuts up any more deviltry."

"Keep cool, Bob, and let your hair grow! We haven't proofs sufficient to proceed to extremities; but, as I have before remarked, we'll give him rope and he'll hang himself. He came very near it last night."

"I want to clear up everything for the major. If we could capture that Lasso Lije, I believe we could choke all the proof we want out of him."

"Have you had your nap yet, Bob?"

"Nary a wink, since night 'fore last!"

"Then take a snooze now. That's what I intend to do, for we must hitch up for the trail at three o'clock this afternoon."

"Thet suits me, Steve, yer kin bet heavy; an'

I'll be dead asleep es soon es I kin spread myself."

Both lay down in the cool shade, closed their eyes, and soon were launched into the land of dreams.

CHAPTER XIX.

THREE OF A KIND.

WHEN Count Broquier, Lasso Lije, and Bill Bowers galloped off in company, the latter was obliged to clutch at the saddle-horn for support. Even then, he reeled from side to side, and was on the point of falling to the ground more than once, had the others not sustained him in the saddle.

Bill's eyes were bloodshot, and he gazed alternately from one to the other of his conductors, with a look of superstitious terror.

The livid marks about the wretch's throat showed how fierce had been the assault of the infuriated old planter, and how near to death Bill had been. None spoke a word, but all spurred madly on, casting apprehensive glances behind them. Broquier's dusky face was almost cadaverous in appearance.

None were likely to forget the treatment they had received, and all realized what would be their portion, should they again fall into the hands of Dora Dale's avengers.

"Satan tortur' me!" said Lije, finally, and gazing at Bill in wonder; "pard Bill, yer looks cur'ous-like. What's ther difficult wi' yer?"

"Let him alone, Lije; he's not got back to brain biz yet," said Broquier. "We must make fast time, to reach some safe place, where we can hold a consultation, and plan for the future. I'm glad we happened to meet again."

"It was a strange and fortunate meeting for both of us, and your friend here came in for his share of the benefit—nothing less than his life!"

"How happened it that he left the girl, I wonder? But he will tell us all when he recovers. Do you think there is any doubt of those fellows finding her?"

"I had intended to take her to the arms of her loving father, and all that sort of thing, you know. It would have been a good card in my game, you better believe!"

"I thought yer hed 'nough good keerds in thet leetle game," said Lije, with some show of indignation, "an' hed played 'em ter sweep ther board. Yer war goin' ter run in ther gal when me an' Bill hed been wiped out by thet cussed scout, war yer? Who war he, anyway? An' who hed he with him?"

"You ask questions like a Yankee," said the count; "but I'll explain. I thought I had the deadwood on the old planter, and I would have won the game long ago; but the girl was too young—that was the excuse, you know."

"However, I leached him for ducats, and forced him to sign a paper which puts him in my power. You see, I thought you were dead, and for want of you as a witness I would lose all. I frightened the old fellow, and made him promise to fork over five thousand dollars in thirty days."

"The time is up to-morrow, but, under the circumstances, I shall be forced to rest on my oars."

"This morning I had the worst set-back. That devil of a scout rescued the girl from a mad steer. You've heard of him, I reckon; he is known as Stampede Steve, and a regular devil he is. But I've sworn to kill him, and I'll keep my oath. That settles the scout."

"You know very well that if I had known you were concerned in the abduction I would have joined you at once. But we'll outwit them all yet, and win the game. I'll marry the girl, and then it will be easy enough to give the old man a free pass to the other world, and the property will all be mine!"

"Ef I 'members right, I war ter hev ten thousand pesos, an' I hain't see'd nary a picayune o' hit till yit."

"You shall have that amount, Lije, and Bill shall have a like sum, when the old man makes a die of it. I have a thousand for each of you, to commence with."

"Now yer talkin', Dick! Whar's ther rhino?"

"In my saddle-bags in camp. But I say, your friend don't seem to be recovering fast. Haven't you any liquor with you, Lije?"

"Ya-as, dang'd ef I hesn't! Broke one bottle in ther tree, but thar's another left. Bill, ole pard, take a suck o' chain-lightnin', an' hit'll fotch yer 'roun' ter biz!"

Lasso Lije leaned over in his saddle and placed the bottle to his pard's mouth.

The latter drank freely. He had listened with wonder to every word that had been uttered: the horses having been allowed to walk while Lije and Broquier had conversed.

Bill was not yet in a condition to talk, and the others decided that they must postpone further explanations until they reached some secure retreat. Consequently they again started at a gallop. This they kept up for quite a distance upon the open prairie, and then turned west; speeding in a course parallel with the oak-belt, until they were beyond the scene of the abduction, and the ford.

Then they spurred to, and through the oaks, entering the river-bottom timber.

Finding a small "open," they removed the

equipments, and staked their horses. As they had food in their saddle bags, they made a hasty meal, after everything had been explained to Bill, by Lije. When Bill mentioned the fact that there were but three men of the searching-party, all told; then Broquier and Lije were greatly amazed, and cursed themselves for not having hidden in the undergrowth, shot the scout, the major, and their comrade, and then sped away with Dora Dale. All this would have been easy.

Bill Bowers was even more furious, for he remembered the rough usage he had received from every member of the party.

But regrets were now useless, and they at once set about planning toward the assassination of Stampede Steve, and then hurrying up the marriage between Broquier and Dora, or the abduction of the maiden, the robbing of the train, and the murder of the major, should their marriage plot fail.

Both Broquier and Lije explained their wanderings and experiences since they had been separated, and the three now formed a compact, to be true to each other, and to have their revenge upon Steve, the Scout.

"Now, to business," said the count; "and, in the first place, do you know of any outlaw band beyond the San Antonio? We must have a strong force. I don't care whether they are Mexicans or white bandits, so long as our work is accomplished."

"We'll let them have the wagons, freight and mules; that is, all except a part of the lading of one wagon, which we must remove secretly before the attack, and 'cache.' There is a box of gold, which I think we will appropriate; besides, we shall stipulate that the girl belongs to me. Do you understand?"

"How much, does yer calkerlate, air in ther box?"

"I can't say; but it's a fortune for each of us!"

"Dog-gone my heart!" now put in Bill; "ef I wouldn't like ter hev a grip onter thet ole cuss's throat, what throttled me! Hit 'ud be more satisfac' than ther money."

"An' Satan burn me," said Lije, "ef I wouldn't rather git a grip onter ther hellyun what slung me inter ther Guadalupe, than stick a thousand pesos inter my pouch!"

"Don't fret, pards," said Broquier; "neither of you has as much reason to hate that infernal scout as I have. The first moment I set eyes on him, I knew he was fated to be a thorn in my side, or be my death."

"I knew that he would read me through and through, and do all he could to balk my plans. I felt he was to be the man who would gaze into my eyes when I was gasping out my last breath; and, by heavens! my experience with him since has not been such as to weaken that impression. But, I have sworn, not only to carry out my plans, but to have his life!"

"But what air our first move?" inquired Lasso Lije.

"I shall return to the camp, and keep with the train. You, boys, must go at once to the Frio, and, if possible, get assistance of the right sort."

"Keep an eye open for our arrival, and meet me one mile below the camp, wherever it may be."

"Then we'll be ready for some kind of biz, on the jump. If I can work the marriage-racket, I'll do it, for there's a preacher in the outfit. If I do, the train is ours, and the girl is mine. The gold we'll divide. Then hurrah for a merry life in Mexico!"

"Thet's all bunk; but we-uns must 'member thar's some danger o' our gittin' choked off in ther 'rangement."

Thus spoke Bill, as he caressed his neck, which bore the plain marks of the old planter's terrible grip.

Both Broquier and Lije laughed, more to cheer their pard than aught else; but this only enraged him the more. The count then urged the others to depart at once, as they were in a dangerous position.

"But, dang hit, Dick," said Lije, in a perplexed and apprehensive voice and manner, "they mought take a notion to hang you up ter dry, when yer glides inter ther camp!"

"I'll risk that," was the response. "I have a plan already arranged to outwit them, and throw off suspicion. They don't know that I have been down the river at all."

"The cuss that threw me into the stream, didn't know me from Adam. It was too dark there."

"I'll make them believe that I have been blundering around below the ford, searching for the girl. Don't fret about me, but start at once."

And start, the two ruffians did, for they feared discovery; and with but little more talk in regard to the proposed arrangements.

With a shake all around, and mutual vows repeated, Bill and Lije disappeared, and the count turned his steps toward the river.

After proceeding some distance in deep thought, he felt for a book in his side pocket. This he jerked out nervously, and with an expression of fiendish triumph upon his face.

As he walked along he did not notice that

a paper fell from the book and fluttered into the grass.

On Broquier went, examining documents and letters, one after another, for some time; his swarthy face becoming darker and more furious, until at length he sunk to a sitting posture; his features becoming ashen, as he once more went carefully over the papers.

Then he sprung to his feet, crying out, in fury.

"Lost! Curses on the luck—lost! In the fiend's name, where could I have dropped it?"

"Did I leave it among my effects, in the wagon? Hell and furies! I am an idiot, to be so careless."

"What would be my chances, if that cursed scout should find that document? It would seal my doom at once, for he would see through my scheme. One can't fool him, like that weak-minded old major."

"By heavens, this is terribly unfortunate! I wouldn't have parted with that paper, for which I have worked and plotted for two years—not for a small fortune! And now, it is lost!"

"But, by the eternal, I'll win the game without it; besides gaining my revenge! I must play fine now. I must be humble, and even fawn upon those I hate and despise."

"Anything, to win a wife, and a fortune? By Jove, let me think—think, and plan!"

Then, gaining a thicket, from which he could command a view of those who were in search of Dora Dale, should they return to the camp, Broquier lay crouched within it; forming schemes, and studying as to the most plausible manner, in which to account for his absence, in the first place, and then, in what manner he had best conduct himself for the present.

Thus he remained, until he discovered, to his intense fury, the major, with Steve Speed, Bob Barr, and Dora; all approaching the ford.

He must hasten now, and join them as soon as possible after their return.

The entrance of the arch-villain into camp, shortly afterward, has been already described.

CHAPTER XX.

ONLY WAITING.

ABOUT two weeks from the day of the return of Major Dale and his party to the wagon-train on the Rio Guadalupe, found them within view of the ribbon of timber that marked the course of the Rio Frio, near its confluence with the Rio Leona.

But little of interest to the reader, had occurred on the trip from the Guadalupe.

Count Broquier remained, the greater part of the time, in the wagon that had been allotted to his use; for, he well knew that he could not see the familiar footing on which the young scout was with the major and his daughter, and control his rage.

But the wretch comforted himself, with anticipations of the sweet revenge that was coming.

At first his feelings of insane hatred were so torturing, that, more than once, he resolved to steal upon Steve Speed, when he slept, and plunge a knife into his heart. His cowardice, however, providentially prevented the would-be assassin from attempting the life of the man he so feared and hated.

Well did Broquier know that, did he fail to kill the scout at one blow, his own life would pay the forfeit; and, even did he succeed in slaying him, all the evidence would point toward him, and he would be lynched at once, did he not escape.

Consequently, the count held himself aloof; but this proceeding on his part, so entirely unlike his previous conduct, caused every one in the company to suspect that all was not right.

It appeared to Steve, that the miscreant must have strong hopes from what he expected his confederates to accomplish; otherwise he would not be thus calm, and apparently unconcerned.

Only once had Broquier sought a private interview with Major Dale; when he reminded the old planter, that the time agreed upon for his final decision in regard to the proposed marriage had expired, and that he did not propose to be trifled with any longer. He also asserted, that he proposed to shoot the young scout, if he did not keep his place, and refrain from associating on such intimate terms with his promised wife.

To all this, the major made no reply. He merely gazed, in a hopeless manner, at Broquier.

Doubly infuriated, the count now swore that, did not the old man compel his daughter to marry him, upon reaching the Leona, he would denounce him as an assassin, produce another man who had been a witness to the murder, and also furnish the major's own written acknowledgment of the crime.

Still, Major Dale heard the villain in silence.

"I repeat," snarled Broquier, with flashing eyes; "I repeat, that I will furnish evidence, in your own hand-writing, that will hang you like a dog! Do you hear? Do you forget that you are in my power?"

"I recollect having given you a paper, but I forget the nature of its contents," returned the old planter, still in the same quiet manner.

"Please allow me to examine it. I told you at the time that I could not control my child's heart."

Had a bomb-shell exploded at his feet, the count would not have been more startled.

At once it flashed through his mind, that the paper he had lost had been found; and that Major Dale had gained possession of it, and destroyed it.

In no other way could the miscreant account for the old man's indifference to his threats.

"What the devil has come over you?" he demanded. "You are trifling with me, and it is all through that infernal scout! But I'll let you know that I shall hold you to your bargain."

"I have you under my thumb, and I defy Steve Speed. I'll have his blood, for interfering with my affairs!"

Hardly had these words passed Broquier's lips, when he felt himself clutched by belt and collar, and then he flew through the air, over a clump of bushes, and into a slimy water-hole.

There, half submerged, the ruffian remained, listening intently, but no sound caught his ear.

Crawling free of the slime and mud, into the bushes, his teeth grating together, he peered through the branches, but not a soul was within view.

But Broquier knew that his assailant had been none other than Steve, the Scout.

The miscreant was murderously mad; his thirst for revenge being more intensified, because he was at that time, powerless to act.

And why was it, that the major had been so cool and unconcerned during that interview?

The reason was, that Steve Speed, unable to bear the sight of the old man in his mental agony, had resolved that he would attempt to cheer him to relieve his overburdened brain.

Seeking an interview with Major Dale, one night when the latter, unable to sleep, was sitting beside the camp-fire, the scout said, in a low voice:

"Major, I want a few words with you. Any one, with half an eye, can see that you have a heavy load upon your mind."

"In a somewhat strange manner I have become acquainted with the nature of your trouble."

The old man trembled, and Steve continued.

"You may rest assured, Major Dale, that I am in this matter, the best friend you have on earth. I do not even except your daughter, for it is not in her power to do for you what I intend to do."

"At our first interview, I knew that villain, Broquier, whose former cognomen was 'Dusky Dick,' had, in some manner, gotten you in his power."

"I saw that he intended to marry Miss Dora by fair means, or foul; and I swore that it should never be, if I could prevent it."

"That was why I accepted your offer to engage me as guide; influenced, however, by other circumstances, of which we need not, at present, speak."

"I was, and am confident, that the hold this wretch has upon you, is of no importance whatever. He is, evidently, the author of a plot, which has succeeded in placing you, seemingly, in his power."

"But, I am confident that it was a plot, and that you are innocent of all that he would have you think he can prove. That you have been hopeless and despairing under all this, has been made positive to me; and that, in a most providential manner. Here is your acknowledgment of guilt and weakness, which I wish you to read, and then burn before my eyes."

Stephen Speed then produced the document he had found on Broquier's trail.

The major clutched the paper with trembling hands, glanced over it, and then thrust it into the fire.

His face, as now revealed by the flame of the burning paper was ghastly; and he stared at the young scout, with a look of superstitious horror.

"There," exclaimed the latter, "that is destroyed! And don't you ever be weak enough to write another of the same character, no matter what may be the consequence of your refusal."

"Don't have the slightest concern in regard to this matter, for all will be well. Broquier would have been a dead man long since, had I not sworn to wring from him a confession of his perfidy to you. I shall yet accomplish it."

"Surely, major, you never thought of yielding to this miscreant's demands? Do you not know, that his persecution of you would end only in death? Why have you not shot him, as he deserved?"

"He had a confederate," said the old planter, in a hoarse and gasping voice. "Both of them have sworn that if one comes to harm the other will reveal all, and prove that his friend was slain by me, to prevent my secret from being known."

"Just so," said Steve; "and, if I am not greatly mistaken, I can, within a very short time, put my hand on that confederate; and it shall fall so strongly, when I do, that he will 'peach' on his pard. Major Dale, the two outlaws who abducted your daughter, were in the company of Broquier later on. One of them was an old associate of his, known as Lasso Lije."

The major groaned at the mention of the name.

"This Lije is our man," continued the scout. "Broquier knocked you senseless, when you werestrangling the other villain; and, releasing him, they all three galloped to the vicinity of the ford, having stolen your horse."

"They have a fresh plot, and that is, to capture this train, when we reach the frontier. Those two started this way, to hunt up some of their fellow outlaws. Do you suppose that Broquier would keep aloof in the wagon, had he not the greatest confidence in the success of this fiendish scheme?"

"I tell you, major, this train will be attacked; but my eyes are open, and we will be prepared for it. They will be sharp, if they steal a march on Stampede Steve."

"Rest assured, Major Dale, that I am in this affair heart and soul; and that you will ere long be happy, and free from all fear of the dastard, who has, of late, cursed your life. I do not ask you to give yourself the pain of making any explanation in regard to the origin of this matter. Let that rest—at least for the present. I have thus spoken, because I have been made miserable, at being a witness to your constant despairing manner and appearance."

"Now, I hope to see a change in you, for the better. You may entertain no further apprehensions of any kind. Allow me to judge of the danger, and to do all in my power to ward it off. Do not mention a word of what I have said regarding the anticipated attack; even to Miss Dora."

"Good-night, major! And, to please me, retire this time, to pleasant dreams—to a sleep undisturbed by that which has driven sleep and happiness from you, for so long a time!"

"Good-night! Good-night, Mr. Speed!" said the old man, faintly; "I cannot thank you as I would. My heart is full and I can say no more."

The old planter retired to his couch, and Steve knew, the following morning, that his words had produced a good effect.

From that time on, the major had been a different man; but the young scout realized that although the old man had been greatly relieved by having an honest man share his secret, and believe in his innocence, he had withal little hope of Steve's being able to prove that innocence to the world.

During the trip, Dora and Steve, as may be supposed, found little opportunity for love-making; but the tender glances each cast at the other, the low-spoken words of affection, when others were not near, were calculated to bind them together, and increase their mutual affection, quite as much as if they had had the opportunity to stroll, arm in arm, or sit side by side, their hands clasped in close communion.

And, as the train at length arrived within view of the serpentine line of timber, that marked the course of the Rio Frio, the emigrants gazed with longing eyes ahead; greatly relieved at nearing their journey's end.

Dora Dale looked forward, rejoicing in the thoughts of happy, most happy interviews with her brave and noble lover.

Steve gazed at the timber keenly, and so did the major, both wondering if within the dark shades crouched the lawless horde which the two dastardly abductors of Dora had been dispatched to collect together, awaiting their coming.

And most fiendish was the face of Count Broquier, as he strove to pierce the line of foliage; he, too, casting sweeping glances up and down the river—anxious, most anxious to discover some indications of the presence of Lije and Bill.

The cowardly villain was now anticipating the revenge and victory which he soon believed would be his.

CHAPTER XXI. GOING INTO CAMP.

WHEN Count Broquier had sought the interview with Major Dale he had felt confident that it would terminate in the old planter's agreeing at once to the marriage of Dora with himself.

The plotter had sought this meeting at a time when he felt sure there would be no interruption, and he had made up his mind to force the old man to the wall by frightening him nearly to desperation, as he had on previous occasions.

Consequently, when he had failed in his object, and decided that it was through the influence of Stampede Steve that the major had been induced to treat his demands with indifference, Broquier, fearing that this had been produced by the finding and destroying of the criminating document which he had lost, was furiously mad. The young scout, and none other, he felt assured, could have picked up the missing paper.

But his fury and thirst for vengeance knew no bounds, when he had found himself hurled over the bushes into the slimy pond.

Retiring into his wagon, the villain foamed at the mouth and tore his hair in his insane fury and baffled rage; for he had not the slightest doubt that he had been thus contemptuously treated by Steve Speed. More than this, it was also beyond his endurance to think that he had

been thus humiliated, thus outrageously assaulted before the eyes of Major Dale, whose fears of him seemed to have become changed to a cool disdain, since Steve had at first manifested these feelings so plainly on the morning of Dora's abduction.

More closely the plotter confined himself to his wagon, after that involuntary bath in the slime and mud, nursing his rage and fury, which were now like a seething volcano of madness in his brain.

Had it not been that he fully depended upon and trusted his tools, Lasso Lije and Bill Bowers, and was without doubt, in regard to revenge, most devilish, being soon in his power to sow broadcast—had it not been for this consolation, he would probably have lost but little time, after his being thus insulted, in attempting the assassination of the scout, disregarding the danger to himself, in his ungovernable fury.

So utterly given up was his mind to the vengeance he had sworn should be his, and that soon, that he lay for hours planning the tortures he would inflict upon the young Texan when the latter should be in his power.

Broquier was not equal to witnessing the, to him, most maddening spectacle of Steve Speed riding upon his superb bay horse in front of the train, and Dora Dale, upon her prancing black beauty, Nero, cantering by the young scout's side.

No more beautiful sight could have been imagined, as the handsome pair, galloping at times over the flower-bespangled prairie, Dora's silvery-laughter serving to cheer and banish fatigue even from the stoical mules. But no scene on earth could have produced more insane rage and mental torture to the count than this.

For this reason the miscreant kept back beneath the wagon-tilt; which fact was a source of rejoicing to the people of the train, and more especially to those in whom we have become most interested.

As the wagons approached the Rio Frio timber, a sudden idea seemed to strike the mind of Broquier.

He reasoned that it would be perhaps a difficult matter for him to leave or enter the camp without notice, and that the keen-eyed scout would, being suspicious of any movement he might make, follow him. Thus his confederates, Bill and Lije, would be discovered, and their plans frustrated.

Reasoning in this way, the count resolved that he would have his wagon separated from the train, and encamp by himself some distance south of the main encampment.

From the fact that he had studiously held himself aloof from all during the trip from the Guadalupe, such a proceeding might not be considered strange by the people of the train, who, Broquier well knew, would, in place of being offended, feel relieved and pleased at his absence from their midst.

Humiliating and exasperating as was this fact of his unpopularity, Broquier was forced to the conclusion that each and every one looked upon him with aversion, and even hatred. For this, too, he vowed he would be avenged.

Another reason for leaving the train, was brought to his mind.

At that far frontier, the camp would be in danger from roving bands of savages, and consequently the wagons would all be placed in corral, to be more readily defended; thus serving as a refuge in case of attack, but which would place the wagons all in danger of being burned, should the assailants be Indians.

For the same reasons the guards would be doubled, and more vigilant; thus causing it to be a difficult matter for him to leave the camp, or return from his meeting with his pards, without discovery. Suspicions, then, were sure to be aroused, as to his night wanderings.

By separating from the train, he believed he would be more protected from an attack by Indians, his wagon and freight in less danger, and he himself free to go and come as he wished. Besides, it was necessary to have his wagon free from the others, in the event of his being forced to carry Dora away to Mexico, should he adopt the secret abduction plan.

The count, therefore, ordered the negro driver to turn obliquely from the train, southeast, to strike the timber about a quarter of a mile below the point that Steve Speed had chosen for the encampment.

The negro, who was a slave of Major Dale's, was greatly astonished, as well as frightened, at this unlooked-for order; but, as Broquier informed him he need not remain with the wagon, his face and mind were cleared of all fears.

When Steve discovered this new departure, he called the attention of the major, Dora, and the teamster, to the lone wagon, saying:

"It is just as I expected! Dusky Dick has begun to think there will be too many eyes watching him here—that it will be no easy matter to pass the guards, going in and out; and consequently, it may interfere with his little game."

"But we shall see what we shall see."

"I reckon, if he camps alone, it will cause but little regret in the train; and I am certain

that I can easily walk to his lonely retreat, and keep an eye on his movements."

"I think the lasso is in this outfit, that will choke out his vile life, and serve to suspend his villainous carcass from the limb of a tree."

As far as Major Dale was concerned, he had, since his interview with Broquier, which had terminated in so humiliating a manner for the latter been in constant fear of the miscreant, who, he knew, would hesitate at no crime. The old planter, had it not been for the constant watchfulness of the scout, would doubtless have sought Broquier, with the object of making a compromise with him.

The young man was forced to reason with the major, and encourage him almost constantly; but all efforts of his, as regards dissipating the gloom and despondency of the old planter, were fruitless. The fact that Broquier held himself aloof, affected Major Dale greatly. He was in constant dread, at night, of assassination, besides, fearing, each morning to be told that Dora had been carried off by the merciless miscreant, who had made his life a torment.

When the attention of the old planter was called to the withdrawal of the count from the train, the major felt assured that the climax of the ruffian's fury was at last reached, and that startling events would follow; for he fully believed that Broquier had been confident that his confederates would secure assistance, and thus he would carry out his nefarious scheme, on the Rio Frio.

If this had not been the case, he argued, the villain would not have remained all this time secluded in his wagon.

At times the major had almost decided to confide in Steve, even to reveal to Dora his dread secret; but his strength of purpose failed him on each occasion, for he feared that those who now believed in his innocence, and had resolved to establish it, might be shaken, did they know the plain and indisputable proofs against him.

Gradually Major Dale had become a broken-hearted and hopeless man, a mere wreck of his former self, through the constant persecutions of the count, who was, as the old planter felt confident, himself the criminal.

The fiendish crime had, by the strongest evidence, been laid at Dale's door, by the very one whom he believed to have committed it.

The consequence was that, although the young scout appeared so confident, and made free use of cheering words—as also did Dora, who believed implicitly in the success of Steve, in anything the latter undertook—notwithstanding this, the major uttered a groan of despair and dread, as he saw that Broquier had severed his connection with the train.

The scout deputed Dora to watch and condole with her father, and then proceeded to superintend the arrangement of the wagons, which were now placed within a horseshoe bend of the Frio; the heel of the same being but some ten yards across.

As there were fully three acres of grass-grown sward within the bend, it was a most favorable place for a large encampment. The animals could be herded outside on the plain, and be driven into the bend at night.

The camp could be easily guarded, as, with the exception of the neck of the bend, it was surrounded by towering timber.

Beneath this was dense undergrowth, and the river-banks beyond were high and steep; the camp being perfectly secure from attack by mounted men, except at the narrow entrance referred to.

As the sun was yet some distance above the horizon, the scout ordered the mules to be herded upon the plain. He then dispatched men, up and down the river, to search for a favorable place for the animals to reach the water to drink.

The fires were kindled in a circle outside of the wagons, and soon the camp presented a busy scene; jest and laughter sounding on all sides. The people of the train were relieved and joyous, at knowing they were near the end of their long and tiresome journey.

Soon the negro, who had been teamster for Broquier, came into camp, and Steve at once interviewed him.

"Where has the count camped, Jim?"

"'Bout fo' er five shoots from this byer, Mars' Steve. Golly! I's mighty glad ter git cl'ar o' him. He too much like de ole debil ter suit dis chile."

"What did he have done with the mules?"

"Done made me stake dem outside de timber, Mars' Steve!"

"Is he going to attend to the animals, and do his own cooking?"

"Reckon he am, Mars' Steve! He's ugly es a painter. I war'feard he'd chaw dis nigger up raw. I declar' I doesn't keer 'bout drivin' fer him no mo'!"

"Did he tell you to come to camp here?"

"Ya-as, Mars' Steve; he done tole Jim ter skip lively. He said he didn't want ter see me ag'in, ontil ter-morrer mo'nin'."

"All right, Jim! You'll have to take your turn at guard duty. How far into the timber did the count have the wagon taken?"

"Cluss up ter de river-bank, Mars' Steve; an'

hit's a big jump down ter de water. But dar's a wash-out dis side, what I done druv de mules down ter drink et."

"Good; I'm glad you told me. Go to your mess, Jim, and report after supper to Bob Barr," said the scout, turning away.

"Thank yer, Mars' Steve!"

Touching his greasy hat, in parting salutation, the negro hastened to join his comrades, who were within a separate circle of fires near the neck of the bend.

Steve then ordered a tent to be pitched within the circle of wagons, for the use of Dora; as he intended to explore the country beyond the Frio, and up the Leona, before proceeding in that direction with the train.

It was probable that they would not make another move for two or three days, as the young scout now considered matters.

He little dreamed of what was destined to take place before that time.

CHAPTER XXII.

WHEN SHALL WE THREE MEET AGAIN?

WHEN the negro teamster had left the lone camp of Count Broquier, the latter strode back and forth in the small clear space, within which he had his wagon drawn, like a madman.

He had watched Jim keenly and suspiciously, as if he believed the negro would dart into some thicket, and there crouch and spy on his movements. Treacherous himself, he believed that every one was plotting against him.

Although the distance from the wagon to the verge of the timber was considerable, the villain tore through the undergrowth to that point, and gazed in the direction of the main camp.

All within his view were intent upon the care of the animals, and none appeared to look in his direction.

For a long time the count thus watched them, until he became enraged at the seeming indifference with which his departure had been regarded. No one paid the slightest attention to his withdrawal.

All this was torture to the vain and conceited ruffian, and he now pictured them as speaking of the relief they experienced in having the Jonah of the expedition removed. At the thought of the joy of Steve and Dora, the miscreant clutched at the branches near him, stamped his heels into the sward, and ground his teeth in impotent rage.

More like an insane man he acted than one gifted with reason. Then, suddenly thinking of the agreement between him and his two confederates, he whirled about and gazed down the river. He could see for a mile along the border of the timber, as the river swept northerly.

As Broquier reasoned that his allies ought to have been on the lookout and discovered the train, and also his departure from it, he became still more infuriated. As it was, he now stood alone, and with a longing for revenge, which he could not hope to carry out unless he had considerable force to assist him.

He had expected to meet that help upon reaching the Rio Frio, but there was not the slightest indication of the presence of Lije and Bill, with their outlaw companions. In explanation of this came now a suspicion, a very strong suspicion, considering the source—this traitor to all except himself and his own interests.

Lije and Bill had become frightened.

Did they, when they left him, have any intention of assisting him?

It was doubtful.

Was not Lije doubtful in regard to the promises made ever being fulfilled, even did they succeed in capturing the train?

Did they really believe him, when he told them of the large amount of money in the train?

Was it not possible that they both believed he was only intending to use them as tools, and cast them aside unrewarded when all that he wished was accomplished?

As he had failed to make good his promises to Lasso Lije in an affair which was the beginning of this, it seemed reasonable that Lije should doubt his sincerity now.

It was quite natural for such a traitorous scoundrel to reason thus; and he eventually concluded that he had been most overwhelmingly beaten in the wagon-train, and also degraded and disgraced. Such a conclusion, or even suspicions toward it, was terrible to the miscreant to contemplate.

He felt that his very life depended upon his success during the next forty-eight hours; indeed, that he would rather die than not effect his purpose, and fulfill his oft-repeated oaths of vengeance.

Thrice desperate and maddened, Broquier returned, in a headlong rush, to the wagon, and knocked loose the cover of a box containing bottles of brandy. This had been his only consolation when cooped up in his wagon, and it now served to give him more confidence, causing him to resolve at once upon a search of the bottom-timber in the neighborhood of the point at which he had ordered Bill and Lije to meet him.

This was a mile below the main camp.

The sun was resting its lower disk upon the horizon line, as the count came to this decision; but he could not see that luminary, as the heavy timber and dense undergrowth shut out all view from the west.

Hence it was twilight beneath the trees, and, in the undergrowth, quite dismal, and indeed almost dark.

Broquier was a coward, as his character has proved; but so intense was his fury and disappointment, that not once had he entertained a thought of personal danger—not for a moment did he realize that he was in a section of the border where wild beasts and wilder men might, at any time, pounce upon him.

He was now continually on the watch; his eyes flashing keen glances in all directions; but this was occasioned by his suspicions in regard to some of the people of the train being acting as spies upon him. Having resolved to keep his appointment, he now, with a flask of brandy in his pocket, stole from the wagon, not even taking his rifle with him. He dared not leave the timber, and advance along the border of the same, for fear the herders might discover him, and some of them follow to ascertain his object.

The progress of Broquier through the undergrowth was necessarily slow; and, when it appeared to him that he had gone down the river fully a mile from the train, he crawled to the border of the timber to ascertain if such was the fact, but found that he could not be more than half that distance.

Then he returned, and continued on his course.

He had about concluded that he would go no further, but would return to the wagon; for he had come to the belief that he was in danger of losing his life, for the shrieks of panthers were sending the cold chills through his veins. To his horror, he now felt himself falling through the bushes; having, evidently, stepped into some gully, formed by the waters on the plain having flowed into the river in time of heavy rains.

Down Broquier went, the bushes scratching him; and curses, loud and deep, bursting from his lips.

As he fell, he felt himself clutched, a heavy body upon him, and a blanket thrown over his head.

So shaken up by the fall was he that the breath was completely knocked out of him.

The situation was horrible!

At any instant, he felt, a knife might be plunged into him, and his body be left to be gnawed by wild beasts, in that lonely gully!

This was but for a moment, but it seemed a long time to him. Then he heard voices, in hurried conversation. He had closed his eyes, but when he now opened them—the blanket being removed—he was blinded by the light of a torch, held directly in his face.

Then a familiar laugh sounded, followed by a voice.

"Satan tortur' me, Lije, ef hit ain't Dusky Dick! Dang'd ef he hain't lunged ont'er we-uns without sendin' his keerd, er knockin' at ther door!"

"Dog-gone my heart ef hit hain't Dick, sure es shootin'!" was the exclamation of Lasso Lije.

"Caramba!" said another; "he is the man we were to meet, is he?"

So agreeably surprised was the count, that he could not articulate a word.

Both Bill and Lije grasped him by an arm, and lifted him to his feet, the latter saying:

"What's ther difficult' with yer, Dick? An' when did yer 'rove? Shake yerself tergether, an' 'splain things. We-uns struck this byer locate, 'bout a half-hour ago, an' war jist hev'in' a lay-down. Why didn't yer holler, when yer see'd us?"

"Yer mought ha' got hashed, comin' in thet-a-way: an' yer war mighty nigh hit, I swar!"

"Satan burn me ef he warn't!" agreed Bill.

"Boys, I didn't know you were here. I didn't see you, as you may know by the scare I got; but this is the best sight I have seen for years."

"I was afraid you wouldn't come. The train is encamped a mile from here, up the stream. I came to look for you, and was about to return. I see you have found some good boys to help us."

"The very devil has been to pay. That scout has everything his own way, and I have had to keep in my wagon the entire trip, to avoid killing him, or having him kill me."

"I've got my wagon out of the train, and am camped by myself, a quarter of a mile from the main camp. They're suspicious, and we must lie low. Here, introduce me to your pards, and let us all take a drink!"

As Broquier said this, he pulled his brandy-flask from his pocket; and the band betrayed their liking for the liquor, more than for the man.

The fact was, that the count's blundering manner of lighting in among the outlaws, and his manifest terror, were not calculated to prepossess the gang greatly in his favor.

"Satan tortur' an' eternally torment ther hull lay-out, Dick!" said Lasso Lije, with a scowl of rage and hate. "I 'low, though I hain't raked es many boyees up es I calkerlated on, we kin scrouge out ther ducats, an' ther leetle gal, 'sides wipin' out thet condemned cuss, Stampede Steve!"

Here Broquier passed the bottle.

"Thankee! I don't keer ef I does errigate; an' Bill Bowers, he's jist sp'ilin' for a drink, I'm dead sure!"

Lije, as he finished his remarks, stepped forward, and Broquier extended the brandy bottle to his pard.

At that instant a spurt of fire shot from the dark shades above them, followed by a loud and deafening report that echoed startlingly in the gully, and the brandy flask was shattered into a hundred pieces, flying in the faces of those who were nearest the count, and cutting into their flesh!

Broquier gave vent to a shriek of mingled terror and agony, holding high in air his hand, from which, hanging by a shred of flesh, was his thumb, which had been severed by the bullet that had shattered the bottle.

All was now confusion and excitement.

Instantly every man sprung up the gully, and around an abrupt bend of the same, into the darkness, Lije and Bill dragging the count along with them, while all were cursing, and uttering low, but deep ejaculations of apprehension and amazement.

But silent as death were the shades above and around them.

Not the slightest sound was there.

Naught met the ears of the eager listeners to indicate the position, the flight, or the advance of the stranger marksman.

CHAPTER XXIII.

PREPARING FOR THE ATTACK.

"DOG-GONE ther luck!" hissed Lije; "this hyer looks dang'd dub'ous, ter start with. Dick, I b'lieve yer hev sp'iled ther hull biz by yer blunderin' 'roun'. Yer ain't wo'th shucks on ther scout an' yer never will be!"

"Curses on the man who fired that shot!" said Broquier, in his pain and fury; "and you Lije, shut up your mouth! What are you all standing here for? Are you afraid of one man?"

"If I was not hit, I'd follow him. It was Steve Speed, I'd bet my life! He's just playin' with me, Lije—I feel it! I'm doomed to be shot to pieces by him yet. I'll serve as a target for him to practice at, if we don't turn the tables on him pretty soon."

"Run, some of you, and cut him off! Skute for the border of the timber, and run like deer, for a quarter of a mile. Then form a line to the river, and lie in wait for him!"

"Dang, an double dang my heart, ef we doesn't do our bestest ter corral him!" said Bill. "Lije, stay with Dick, er skute up-stream with him toward ther wagon!"

"There's some brandy in my wagon," said the count; "the cuss shall not cheat us out of that!"

Lasso Lije, as well as he could under the circumstances, bound up the wounded hand of Broquier; both repairing to the glowing coals, at the dying camp-fire, for the purpose; as they were confident that the unknown lurker had vanished as soon as he had pulled trigger.

"Yer'll make a poor show o' shootin' now," said Lije, to his pard. "Hit's your right thumb, an' hit's clean gone. I hed ter cut her loose, an' sling her away. Ther bone's ragged, an' hit'll be lierble ter multiplication this hot weather."

"Mortification, you mean! Confound you, why don't you say something encouraging, instead of trying to make me feel worse!"

"Ther bes' thing yer kin do, Dick, air ter skute fer ther wagon, git some brandy, an' pour ont'er hit."

"More likely you want a chance to pour some down your infernal throat! Hang it! I shall go insane."

"I reckon ye're gittin' thet-a-way now," remarked Lije; "but hit won't do. Yer hain't got no sense ter spar' lately; an' 'specially now, when yer wants hit most."

"I tell yer, pard, thet wagon, an' mules must be gut 'cross ther river 'fore mornin' er ther hull biz air bu'sted. Hit air our best bolt."

"Ther Greasers must be dead sure o' somethin'. Ef one er two gits shot, t'others'll stompede, sure es shootin', ef yer doesn't keep 'em well primed wi' brandy!"

"How are we to move the wagon?" asked Broquier.

"We kin sock some greasy raw-hide 'roun' ther hub-pins an' heels ter stop ther squeakin', an' glide easy down-stream, 'longside o' ther timber."

"Ther guard 'll not see us—I'll bet on thet!"

"Good! I should never have thought of that. But, by Heavens! I shall go mad with pain. If the boys could only capture that scout, I'd torture him!"

"Who are these Mexicans? Can you depend upon them?"

"They're all ther wo'stest sort o' yaller devils," was the reply; "an' ef yer gits ther mad up, they'll fight like Satan. They war

much on ther shoot, but they're perfect on ther cut an' slash.

"I picked 'em up, down on the Nueces, an' ef they sh'd git a fair gaze et ther outfit up yunder, I'm 'fear'd they'd wilt an' skute. I made 'em b'lieve ther train war mostly weemin and children."

"Come on then, pard Lije! I see you are my main dependance. I can stand this no longer. The wagon must be moved, as you say."

"It was a lucky thought of mine, to separate from the train. But let us see what is going on. Where are your horses?"

"Nigh hyer, in a leetle 'open,' whar we-'uns kin sock ourselves onter 'em at any time; an' I hes ther major's nag till yit!"

"That's good, for I haven't mine hitched behind my wagon. Confound it! Everything has gone wrong since that infernal scout struck the outfit, but I'll ring a change, or my cog's not Dusky Dick!"

The pair now proceeded stealthily toward the wagon.

Upon nearing the "open," they perceived their companions around the wagon, helping themselves to brandy. As they came up the count said:

"Did you get a sight of the assassin, boys? I say, go light on that brandy, for we need our wits now, if ever!"

"We-'uns laid fer ther cuss," said Bill, "but we hain't see'd a hair of him! He must ha' dusted right peart es soon es he pulled trigger."

"Es ter ther brandy, I reckon we needs something ter keep our vim up. Hyer's luck, Cap!"

"Bueno! Good health, capitan!" echoed the Greasers, each of whom had possessed himself of a bottle.

"Pour some o' thet stuff onter yer thumb," advised Lije. "I'll take a snifter myself."

That worthy then suited the action to the word.

Broquier stood gazing suspiciously around the gloomy shades. An enemy might be lurking anywhere.

The moon had arisen, or all would have been total darkness. As it was, the scene was wild and weird in the extreme.

"This will not do," said Broquier, at length; "we must remove the wagon, as Lije has proposed. Boys, there is much depending upon this night."

"You shall all roll in gold if you carry out my orders; but let me tell you, we have no fool to buck against in that blasted scout."

"I know Stampede Steve. Caramba! It will be a pleasure to split his heart!"

Thus spoke a most fiendish-looking Mexican, and Broquier grasped his hand warmly.

"Good, senor!" he exclaimed; "you and I are brothers in hate and purpose."

He then went from one to another, speaking to each in a friendly and open manner.

They were a ruffianly-looking lot, those Greasers; and the white outlaws were little better.

In greasy and tattered attire, and armed in the usual manner, no harder looking crowd could have been collected than those low and degraded assassins of the Rio Grande.

No sooner had Broquier made himself familiar with his tools—the Mexicans being obsequious, and treating him with the greatest respect and politeness, since their discovery of the wagon and its contents—than all became, at his orders, busy with their preparations for the removal of the wagon. Their movements were stealthy and silent, the Greasers flitting here and there like assassins approaching their intended victims. True were they to nature.

Guards were posted, to prevent assault from the main camp, and some were dispatched to lead the mules from the plain, in such a way that it would not attract attention from up the river.

This necessitated crawling in the grass, and allowing the mules to feed, as they were led along.

Meanwhile Bill and Lije prepared the wheels, as the latter had suggested, and the animals were quickly harnessed.

The count, when all was ready, called the party into a dense thicket, for consultation.

"Now, Lije," he began, "I have my suspicions that our movements have been observed, from the very start. Steve Speed is not the kind of man to run back to camp, after discovering us in the way that I am certain he did."

"If it was that infernal demon who shot me, he is still keeping an eye on us. Now, I propose that we outwit him. We can play a sneak game."

"Let all of us start with the wagon, before reaching the plain, dart into the bushes, and steal to the wagon-camp. We must remove the tilt from our wagon, and placed it out of sight."

"If care is used, keeping beneath the overhanging boughs, the vehicle will be secure from discovery. How far down the stream will it have to be taken, to find a safe fording-place?"

"'Bout half a mile below ther gully whar yer foun' we-'uns, I reckon hit kin be gut across."

"All right! Now, my plan is, for two of

the boys to take the wagon across, and then up the border of the timber on the opposite side, until nearly opposite the camp of Major Dale.

"Then the two men can drive the mules and vehicle into the timber, pull some wild rye, and feed the animals; being ready for a start, if it should be necessary."

"That's a mighty good 'rangment," agreed Lije, "an' dang my heart, ef I doesn't b'lieve we'll surprise 'em, up-stream, afore sun-up!"

"We'll play our game toward that end," said Broquier. "Now, who is to go with the wagon? Let us have everything arranged all straight."

"Gonzales an' Canales are ther boyees," spoke up Bill. "They kin take her through, fer they knows every crook an' turn of ther Frio."

"Ya-as, they'll do," agreed Lije. "Yer hear, pards! Does yer undercomstan' ther hull biz?"

"Si, senor," the two Greasers replied, in chorus.

"Wa-al, thet's all hunk, Dick; an' now, let's be movin'. This hyer stillness doesn't seem jist squar'. I'm s'picionin' some bloody biz air bein' shoved in onter us."

Thus spoke Bill, but Lije struck in:

"Satan tortur' me, pards, ef I hev'n't a idee! Ef we makes ther raffle toward ther camp yunder, without bein' see'd, we've gut ther dead-wood; an' we-'uns hev gut ter work things thet-a-way."

"Doesn't yer know we kin crawl back arter leavin' ther wagon, an' climb, on ther trees, over ther drink, gittin' ter t'other side, whar thar's a dead-sure thing o' skutin' in on ther camp, on ther sly? Hit's jist struck me whar ther camp air. Hit's in ther big bend; an' they won't think o' guardin' any place 'roun' ther camp, 'ceptin' ther narrer openin' ter ther bend."

"Dang hit, ef we-'uns hain't gut a soft thing on 'em! I war feelin' sorter dubious 'bout not bevin' our nags; but ther fact air, we couldn't do nothin' wi' ther critters."

"Dick, I think we've gut a easy glide in, ther way I hes put hit ter yer. But, fust off, does yer know which wagon ther ducats air inter? Thet's ther question afore this hyer interested crowd o' citizens!"

"Lije," exclaimed the count, "you've hit the nail on the head this time! You're a first-class leader, I must say. I should never have thought of such a proceeding."

"Yes, that's our programme! We'll start from the wagon, down-river, a short distance; and then crossing the stream, as you propose, proceeding up without endangering ourselves, or being liable to discovery."

"Never mind the wagon with the gold! I'll show it to you all, when the time comes; but I don't see any way for us to carry it on foot, we being obliged to cross the river in such a way."

"However, we'll understand things better, after we get up where we can see our game. All is settled, then. Strike out, boys! The game is open now, but don't show your cards!"

All stole from the thicket, and soon the wagon was slowly being drawn toward the plain.

Fifteen minutes after, the vehicle was on the way down the river, beneath the outer limbs of the line of timber, in the dense shade; with but slight noise—certainly not to be detected in the camp above them.

All, except Gonzales and Canales, then stole into the undergrowth, and through the same, to the river-bank; where they incunted up the huge trees, until near the top. Then they made their way, on the interlocked branches, over the dark, rolling waters, to the opposite side of the Rio Frio.

But a moment's halt was made, to ascertain if all were present; and then, the miscreants, thirteen in number, stole, panther-like, through the shades, toward the camp of Major Dale, but on the opposite side of the river from their intended victims.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE WORK BEGUN.

"WHAT a lovely place this is! Why does not papa locate here permanently, instead of going further up the river?"

So said Dora Dale to the young scout.

Dora appeared most lovely, she having quite recovered from the prostration and strain upon her mind occasioned by her capture. At times, however, she was still greatly worried in regard to the evident mystery about her father; but as Steve had asserted confidently that all these clouds should be driven away ere long, the young girl had great hopes that such would be the case.

Nothing marred the happiness of the party, except the presence of Broquier, and, as that had to be endured out of consideration for Major Dale, there was no remedy.

When the count had detached his wagon from the train, it seemed like the lifting of a heavy load from all; but neither Steve, Bob, the major, nor his daughter felt much relieved on further thinking over the situation. The latter's confidence in the scout's ability to out-

wit the villain was the one thing which kept her from dreading the worst.

In the presence of Steve she strove to appear oblivious to any thoughts of the evil genius that had haunted her own and her father's life for the past two years.

It was with this feeling that the young girl spoke the words with which this chapter opens.

"It is, indeed, a charming spot," was the reply of the young man, "and this is a most romantic encampment. I have lived on love and romance for some time past and enjoy it exceedingly."

"For all that," said Dora, laughing, "you seem to have had quite an appetite for more substantial food—but, pray go on; excuse my interrupting you."

"An interruption from you is always welcome."

"Oh, of course! But, pray answer my question?"

Both laughed in chorus.

"Very well; I obey. In the first place, this bend at the time of heavy rains up the country is overflowed, and therefore useless for a building location."

"Secondly, cattle would stray from a ranch on this side of the river, while, should your father locate beyond the Frio, or on the north bank of the Leona, those streams form barriers that will prevent such losses. You must see at once the advantage; for stock can stray only westward."

"Yes, I see that now," said the maiden.

"Besides that," continued Steve, "there is one other advantage, which is more to be considered."

"It is, that war-parties of Indians dash down between the Leona and the Nueces, avoiding places near the confluence of rivers, where they are not easily forded."

"Please don't speak of such a thing. I should faint, I verily believe, at the sight of a red-man or the sound of a war-whoop."

"I can hardly believe that, Dora; but I trust you will not be put to the test. Generally speaking, however, the Apaches and Comanches when in such a retired section as this, make their presence known in ample time for defense."

"There, that is quite sufficient on the Indian question! I declare I never hear one spoken of, that it does not bring that Broquier to my mind. How I detest, and fear that man!"

"He is a very good subject to practice such emotions on," said the scout; "but I sincerely trust you will have no more cause for hating him, than you have at present. He is much too cowardly to be Indian-like, however."

"But, now that you speak of his highness, I am reminded that I must take a short scout in his direction, and ascertain what he is doing. His leaving the train is more than suspicious. It convinces me that he is waiting for those villainous associates of his, and I must investigate matters; although I am confident they could not collect a force of outlaws, strong enough in numbers to cope with us, with any chance of success."

"Don't go alone, Steve," pleaded the maiden; "that wretch may shoot you from some covert!"

"I have to risk all such chances, Dora; but, don't fear for me. I can take care of myself."

"It is strange that Major Dale seems to be more downcast and hopeless since the count left."

"Papa's suspicions are probably similar to your own. He fears some desperate attempt of Broquier toward his sworn revenge."

"It is a singular case," said Steve. "You have said that your father has never appeared the same, since Broquier first visited him. He has never explained anything to you?"

"Not a word; although I have often begged, and prayed him to do so. But, of late, I have refrained from saying anything to him on the subject."

"The dread secret, whatever it is, has nearly brought him to the grave. Oh, how I do hope you may be able to clear it up satisfactorily!"

"I fully expect to do so. But I must now leave you. Do not go beyond the bounds of the camp. There is danger, I am convinced, in the very air."

It is needless to follow Steve Speed, in his slow and cautious advance down the river. He reached the wagon of Broquier, shortly after the latter had set out to meet Lasso Lije and Bill.

In fact, Steve was so near to the miscreant, that he could hear the cracking of twigs, as he struggled through the undergrowth.

Satisfied that the count would not have left the wagon, unless he expected to meet his pards, the young scout pressed on, but still more stealthily.

Some time passed, and Steve knew that Broquier must have gone to the margin of the timber, to ascertain what distance he had gone.

This movement convinced the scout that the outlaws had agreed upon a particular place of meeting. He soon had full proof of this.

Voices were heard, and presently a slight glow from a camp-fire was distinguishable.

Eagerly Steve leaned forward, as he gained the bushes that bordered the "wash-out."

These bushes impeded his view, and he could see distinctly, except just in front of him.

The consequence was that the young Texan distinguished but three men—the count, Lasso Lije, and Bill Bowers. It was the first time that he had seen Lije, but the face of Bill was quite familiar to him.

At once he arrived at the conclusion that little or no apprehension need be entertained in connection with the trio before him. Then as Broquier passed the bottle to Lije, Steve could not resist the temptation of giving the miscreant a good scare; and at the same time to warn the villains that their movements were known and watched.

He, therefore, took quick aim at the flask, at the very point where Broquier's thumb was clasped over it, and pulled trigger. The instant after he stole away on the back trail, feeling assured that he had broken up any hostile arrangements that the ruffians had made for that night and prevented what they might have contemplated doing, had they not been molested.

Only a moment had Steve been at the margin of the gully, and therefore, for reasons mentioned, he knew nothing of the presence of the Mexicans; consequently he returned to camp without the slightest doubt that he had put an end, for that night at least, to any hostile proceedings from the count and his confederates.

But Steve was not done with scouting for the night, as he fondly imagined. He thought that he had Broquier just where he wanted him.

If he could capture him in company with Dora's abductors, the count's doom was sealed.

This the young man determined to do, and to gag Broquier and Lije, thus preventing their speaking. The gags should not be removed, except in the presence of Major Dale. He would then force Lije to tell all that he knew.

But how were they to be secured?

Without doubt they would repair to the wagon during the night for supplies, and then their capture could be easily effected.

After thus reasoning and resolving, Steve sought an interview with Dora, and also with Bob Barr, to whom he revealed everything; but he said not a word to the major.

Bob was instructed to select half-a-dozen men from among the emigrants, and to be ready to go in an hour on the proposed mission.

At the expiration of that time the eight men all armed, started through the shades in the direction of Broquier's wagon.

Silently and slowly, as they neared the little "open," they crawled in a long crescent-like line, to surround the vehicle.

All, however, were soon amazed by the young scout, who sprung to his feet with an ejaculation of astonishment and disappointment.

The wagon was gone.

Instantly Steve darted into the "open," but the hoofs of the mules had trampled the grass in such a manner that in the dim light, no other "sign" was to be distinguished.

Bounding on the wagon-trail, the scout, without a word, sped toward the open plain. There he saw, that the wagon had been driven down the river, beneath the branches of the outer trees; and yet, it seemed that this could hardly have been accomplished, without their having been seen by the guard at the neck of the bend.

What could this mean?

The emigrants gathered around Steve, all puzzled how to account for the departure of Count Broquier, alone—as they supposed—in that far frontier region.

Not until then, did Steve Speed reveal the fact, that the two outlaws of the Guadalupe had met the count by appointment.

Previous to this explanation, the men had thought it strange that so many had been thought necessary to capture Broquier.

The young scout's statement caused the utmost excitement and fury against the count.

"They can't have gone very far," said Steve; "it's a plain trail. What say you, boys? Shall we follow them, or leave them free to crawl in the thickets, and shoot some of us without warning? They are dangerous characters, and must hang on the limbs of a tree, before you and yours can be considered safe."

"Foller ther hellyuns!" cried Bob Barr; and his words were echoed, with mad determination, by his companions.

Steve said no more, but walked forward on the plain trail.

All would soon curse themselves for so doing; but it seemed to be their duty to themselves, their wives and little ones.

On they went, as fast as was practicable, until they reached a point, at which Broquier, Lije, and Bill, with the other ten outlaws, had left the wagon, and torn through the undergrowth, toward the river.

"What in Heaven's name, does this mean?" exclaimed Steve; "the wagon has gone on, and here are evidences that quite a number of men have plunged into the thickets!"

"Boys, it is certain I didn't get into their main camp! They have secured help."

"There is a regular band of outlaws, and danger, and death threatens the camp of Major

Dale. Back! Back, I say, and defend your wives and children!"

Cries of wonder, rage, and anxiety, shot from many lips.

"Listen, boyees!" said Bob; "dang my heart ef ther hellishness hain't commenced!"

"Come on! Ther condemned coyotes air et ther camp already!"

At the first word spoken by the teamster, all halted in silence.

The sound of fire-arms, wild yells, and shrieks, now filled the air.

These came from up the river—from their camp at the bend!

"Back, men! Run for your lives! The safety of our friends depends upon our speed. The infernal miscreants have commenced their bloody work. Oh, Dora! My darling Dora, why did I leave you?"

Thus yelled Stampede Steve, and on like madmen, rushed all the party, keeping along the margin of the timber, and aiming to enter the camp by the open neck of the bend.

On they dashed, all panting, their eyes flashing, their weapons gripped, and every muscle strained to the utmost.

CHAPTER XXV.

RECAPTURED.

It really seemed as though the Evil One favored his own—first in keeping the Greasers in their places in the gully, when Steve had fired his revolver; secondly, in hastening the departure of Broquier and his allies, with the wagon; and thirdly, in luring the young scout and the emigrants, away from the camp, further on the wagon-trail.

The count was almost beside himself with joy and triumph; for the keen-eyed Mexicans had, as they came up, discovered the scout and his men, stealing toward the "open." Not until that moment, did Broquier realize that the luck had changed.

Not only had he and his confederates escaped danger and death, but a large party were absent from the bend; and would, without doubt, follow the trail of the wagon for some distance. This would give the camp up to him and his gang.

The face of Broquier was fiendishly exultant.

It was with difficulty that he repressed a taunting yell, as he pictured in his mind, the astonishment and fury of Steve Speed and his men, at finding themselves outwitted.

The count believed that Steve had seen the Mexicans, at the gully, else he would not have taken so strong a force toward the wagon.

The eight men, as seen in the moonlight, seemed many more in number.

But the ruffian lost not a moment.

He urged his men forward, destined to make another discovery. This was neither more nor less than a huge tree that had fallen directly across the river, forming a bridge, and thus saving much valuable time.

Thus the lawless horde reached the border of the undergrowth, and peered forth in eagerness.

Moments were precious, however, and little time could be spent in reconnoitering.

Broquier pointed out the wagon in which was the box of specie, and detailed half of the Mexicans to be led by Lasso Lije, to make a dash and secure the gold. They were ordered to carry the box through the timber and over the river. Should they be followed, and in danger of losing the gold, they were to hide or sink it.

All stragglers were directed to retreat down the border of the timber, on the opposite or south side.

Bill Bowers had orders to secure Major Dale, if such a feat should be possible.

It occupied but a very short time for the count to give these directions, for he saw that he had arrived at a most propitious time, as all between them and the line of wagons was in deep shade, and nearly all the men of the train appeared to be near the neck of the bend.

These were probably listening for any sound from Stampede Steve and his party, down the river.

Major Dale was not to be seen, but the tent in the midst of the wagons, Broquier decided, must cover the major and Dora.

The mules were scattered about the "open," between the wagons and the timber. This favored the outlaws, for the men at the neck of the bend would be impeded in their course toward the point of alarm by these animals.

All arrangements, as has been mentioned, were quickly made by Broquier, who was in a most excited state; his wound being, for the time, entirely forgotten. Bidding all drink success to their undertaking, he caught his revolver in his left hand, and waving the weapon over his head, sprung from the undergrowth, all following at full speed.

Thus they went, Lasso Lije leading those under him, springing toward the wagon in which was the treasure.

Those under the count darted between the

wagons and then over into the oblong space, where, upon blankets, lay full a score of women and children. Over some of these, Broquier and Bill rushed toward the white tent, and then the camp rung with the shrieks of the appalled women and little ones.

Not until then did the exultant yells of the Mexicans, eager for blood and booty, cut through the air. The husbands and fathers, who were on guard at the neck of the bend, then realized the cause of the alarm, and rushed with vengeful outcries to the scene of tumult.

Before Broquier reached the tent, Dora Dale and her father sprung from it, and stood bereft of all power to speak or move. Words cannot express the horror of the poor girl, when she recognized one of the men who had taken her captive on the Rio Guadalupe.

Beyond Broquier and Bill was a horde of hideous Mexicans, all brandishing knives and pistols and yelling like fiends.

It was enough to appall the stoutest heart, and no wonder was it that poor Dora was helpless with fright.

Major Dale, for a moment was thunderstruck; but the danger that threatened his child, and the recognition of the dastard who had so persecuted him, aroused the old planter to furious action. Bounding in front of Dora, the major drew his bowie, and stood braced for the shock; but, with a defiant yell, Broquier sprung aside, and Bill Bowers rushed headlong upon him.

The dastard count then clutched Dora in his arms, with a yell that was perfectly fiendish in intonation.

With loud cries for help, the poor girl was hurried toward the wagons by her abductor, who then perceived Lije and one of the Mexicans with the treasure-box, rushing in the direction of the undergrowth. Giving an encouraging yell, Broquier sprung upon the tongue of a wagon.

Then it was that the reports of pistols rung out, and the negroes had all they could do to prevent a stampede of the mules. The count cast one glance backward, poor Dora's gaze being also fixed in horror upon the struggle between her father and Bill Bowers, which terminated in the major's being felled to the earth by a terrible blow from Bill's revolver; but the outlaw was too closely clutched to shoot, or even to cock the weapon, and he realized that he was lost if he lingered where he was.

The unhappy girl saw her aged father fall to the earth, his corpse-like face upturned in the moonlight, and the blood plainly distinguishable upon his brow. Then with a piercing and bitter cry, the terribly tortured and horrified maiden lost all sense.

"Come on, men! On, to the river, I say! Retreat! Retreat!"

Thus yelled Broquier, springing from the wagon-tongue with his fair burden, who lay, limp and pallid, her wealth of wavy hair flying free over the miscreant's arm and shoulder.

By this time, the infuriated men of the train were close upon the outlaws, and four Greasers lay outstretched, dead upon the sward; while groans of agony and shrieks of anguish told of the dead and wounded within the circle of the wagons.

Broquier knew well, that no mercy would be shown him if captured, that he and any of his followers would be strung to the end of a lariat without a moment's delay to die a terrible death.

Like a madman, his all, his very life, depending upon his exertions for the moment, the count dashed desperately to cover, and toward the natural foot-bridge; tearing through the thickets, and hearing on all sides, the crashing of his miscreant followers.

Greatly to his surprise and indignation, the arch scoundrel discovered Lasso Lije and the Mexicans, striving with all their power to gain the tree-trunk, pursued by an infuriated Texan.

He perceived at once that Lije had at first strayed from his course.

The pair were so hard pressed by their pursuer, that they were forced to drop over into the river; but, as the Texan had observed the act, Bill Bowers, who sprung up beside Broquier, immediately shot the trainman dead in his tracks.

The next moment the count, with Dora in his arms, sprung over the tree-trunk, and into the dense undergrowth, disappearing from view, with a number of Mexicans in his front, and Lasso Lije with them.

Close behind them, followed Bill Bowers, and the few stragglers that had brought up the rear, in the conflict and flight.

The yells of the maddened Texans caused the outlaws to dash wildly through the undergrowth for their lives, going toward the south plain, where they expected the wagon.

But not far had Broquier proceeded, slowly from necessity, burdened as he was, when, high above the din at the camp, he heard a far-sounding yell of vengeance.

Not only he, but Lije and Bill as well, knew that sound, and trembled.

It was the vengeful yell of one whom they all feared, more than they did the entire force in the camp—the yell of Stampede Steve!

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE PURSUIT.

BROQUIER quickened his pace, but his burden impeded him, and he called loudly for Lasso Lije, who at once relieved him, taking the senseless form of Dora; but, cursing like mad at having been forced to leave the box of gold in the river.

"Hang the money! We can get that at any time, for they will not know what became of it," shouted Broquier, panting for breath; "but our lives, once gone, are gone for good. They are after us now, like a pack of bloodhounds. We are in a desperate position, and you know it!"

"Oh, Bill! Bill, I say! Bill Bowers!"

Thus yelled Lije, without noticing the count.

"Hyer I air, pard, on a reg'lar stampede; with Stampede Steve arter me, I reckon!"

Thus responded Bill, bursting from the bushes.

"Gi'n a few yelps, an' git ther Greasers tergether! Look out fer ther wagon, an' turn ther cussed thing aroun' lively! We must skute back fer our animiles."

"All hunk, Lije! I'll do it; but ther yaller-bellies air ormighty skeered."

Bill then gave out several peculiar whoops, which were answered from different points; and, in five minutes, all of the party of outlaws were together, who had succeeded in escaping across the bridge.

Four had been left behind dead, or badly wounded; and three of those who had escaped had received slight wounds. Bill Bowers had been cut somewhat by the knife of Major Dale.

Lasso Lije, who understood the Mexicans, and knew that they would, if one of their number started it, kill Broquier, Bill, and himself, on account of the disaster they had met with, cried out:

"Keep close tergether, boyees! We'll escape now, and come back for the doubloons. Me and Garcia left them in the river, and we'll fish them out!"

Instantly the faces of the Greasers brightened, and all bent their muscles to escape.

By gestures, Bill indicated to the two Mexicans in charge of the wagon, as they neared the same, to turn the vehicle about, and he was quickly obeyed.

"Pile in lively, boyees!" yelled Lije. "Take ther gal, Bill!"

And into the wagon, all sprung; poor Dora being passed, not too gently, into the vehicle.

"Slash ther cussed mules fer all they're woth! Strike straight back ther way yer come, an' we'll jump ther critters soon es we roves t'other side ther drink!"

Thus directed Lasso Lije, and away they went.

"Doesn't yer tumble ter my leetle game, boyees!" he again cried out. "I'lows ter sarcumvent 'em. We can't buck ag'in' sich a crowd. We must glide 'cross ther drink, skute through ther timber ter ther no'th plain, an' jist everlastin'ly hum over ther perrarer, west; takin' chances o' bein' see'd when we skute past ther mouth o' ther bend, whar ther train air camped. Hit's our only show fer ter git away."

"They'll be huntin' we-uns on this side, an' what's left in camp 'll be interested with ther wounded, an' thar 'tention 'll be all t'other way; so they won't be lible ter git a peep et us."

"Hit's what I call a 'riginal p'ogramme. What d'yer think o' hit, Dick and Bill?"

"It's an excellent plan, Lije," said Broquier. "Hang it, Bill! We all played our cards to count, except you. Why didn't you scoop in the old man?"

"Didn't yer tell me not ter shoot nor stab, thet yer wanted him alive?" growled Bill. "He's a roarin' rager, an' ef I hedn't ha' knocked him jist es I did, he'd ha' done fer me dead sure!"

"Did yer kill ther ole cuss?" asked Lasso Lije.

"He hain't got much life inter his carkidze. I'm lettin' fer I gi'n him a socked-digger!"

"Hit war lively times fer a few brief periods," remarked Lije, after swallowing a drink of brandy—an example which was followed by the others—"but I reckon we'd better put directly up ther Frio, cross 'bout whar ther Lasso runs in, an' then skute lively fer ther timber."

"We kin lay low thar, an' see our hull back trail to ther Frio, spottin' anybody what might skute arter we-uns. We've got grub an' brandy, hain't we, Dick?"

"Yes, plenty," was the reply. "You've laid out a route that jist suits me. Everything has turned out pretty well. My luck changed with the shooting off of my thumb. I only regret that we didn't have a chance to lay that scout out cold, or capture him."

"Hit 'ud ha' bin a mighty cluss shave, I reckon," said Lije, "ter hev skun out with hull skins, ef he'd bin in camp; an' I'm dead sartain yer wouldn't ha' gut off wi' ther gal."

"Ther fac' air, Dick, he'd ha' bored yer, sure es preachin'. He's a terror on wheels, an' a cyclone wouldn't ha' bin nowhar 'side o' him, ef he see'd yer hev'in' ther gal."

"But hyer we air, in ther drink! Jump outer ther wagon, boyees, soon es we gits across. We

must skute lively fer ther hosses. Every minute counts a heap."

By this time the mules had clattered up the north bank of the Frio, and into the undergrowth. All sprung out, and in five minutes more, the wagon was humming over the north plain toward the west; Lije, Bill, and seven Mexicans all upon their horses; speeding along-side.

Broquier remained in the wagon, poor Dora lying upon some bales of blankets, unconscious.

Exultant though he was the face of the miscreant turned ghastly, and he trembled, as he gazed toward the narrow opening in the line of timber to the south which led into the camp of the wagon-train. This, the outlaw horde must pass, and risk the chances of being observed by the infuriated Texans.

However, the very boldness, the daring of Lasso Lije's plan, almost insured success; as the north plain would be the most unreasonable place at which any could expect to discover the outlaws. Besides, as Lije had reasoned, nearly all the men of the train were on the south side of the river, searching the thickets and gullies; while those, who remained in camp, were comforting the women and children, removing the dead from their sight, and attending to the wounded.

The attention of the negroes, whose duty it was to prevent the mules from straying out from the bend, or stampeding, was naturally directed to the interior of the bend and camp; dreaming not of any reason why they should gaze out over the plain, toward the north, on the back trail.

Hence, the wagon sped fully a mile beyond the entrance to the bend, and past the same, west; unnoticed by any of the demoralized party.

And, in more than this had Lije's plan of escape proved successful; for none of the searchers imagined, for a moment, that the outlaws would re-cross the river.

Steve Speed had, with the trainmen, when on the trail of the wagon, reached a point where a number of men had plunged into the undergrowth; and this was the first knowledge that the scout had, of Broquier's having secured a band to aid him.

As the wagon had been removed, and soon after the sounds of the conflict reached the ears of the scout and his men; he, naturally, and with good grounds, reasoned that the outlaws, who had left the wagon at the margin of the timber, and struck toward the river, had gone for their horses, crossed the stream, hastened up it, crossed again, and attacked the camp. They must, then, have left their animals on the margin of the timber and the south plain.

The young scout did not reach all these conclusions, until he had dashed into the camp, and there seen the death and disaster that had occurred; and that his darling had again been abducted, and this time by Broquier himself, assisted by the previous abductors, and others.

When Steve and his party dashed into camp, all was the wildest confusion. The air was filled with shrieks of terror, and the vengeful yells of such of the Texans as were tearing through the thickets in pursuit of the outlaws.

On the instant Steve saw that the camp had been entered from the opposite side of the river, and, as a matter of course, the horses and the wagon must have been taken over the stream—the wagon for the purpose of conveying Dora Dale to Mexico!

That these ruffians had in a very short time, planned and executed this attack in such a successful manner, and that they had prepared for every emergency, was evident; which fact proved that some of them must be well acquainted with the lay of the land.

No sooner did Steve Speed hear the sounds of attack than he knew Dora had been captured.

He felt as well assured of this as he did when he rode into camp and heard the fearful news.

Great was his self-condemnation when he reflected that he had twice spared that miscreant's life, when he would have been perfectly justified in shooting him.

A terrible shock it was to the young man to see two Texans lying stark and stiff, while their wives and children cried and moaned over their bodies. Two more he perceived were desperately wounded; but when he saw the outstretched form of Major Dale, apparently lifeless, Steve's anguish was painful to witness.

Terrible indeed had been the consequences of his having allowed that merciless monster, Broquier, to live, in order that he might wring from him a confession of his dastardly crime—a crime which the scout believed had been committed for the purpose of fastening it, by a chain of circumstances, upon the old planter.

For a moment all the horrors of the scene were fully realized; even to the proofs brought to his mind by the dead Greasers. These told him that Dora Dale was a captive to a horde of Rio Grande outlaws, who were associates in crime with her former abductors.

Springing from his horse Steve rushed to the side of Major Dale; but a slight examination showed that the old planter was not dead—that he had been merely stunned by a blow on the

head, probably received while defending his daughter.

Satisfied in this respect, the young scout dashed madly toward the timber, yelling for the men who had been with him to follow on to the rescue of the major's daughter.

Frantically he darted through the timber, urging men to search here and there, and sending others to inspect the south plain; yet not a sign or trace of Dora, or the wagon, could be discovered.

The wagon had been driven up the river and also, on the return, on the soft-yielding grass on the border of the timber; hence it was impossible in the moonlight to find any trail.

Reason pointed to the probability that the outlaws had proceeded up the river, but who could tell, until daylight, which way the miscreants had gone? But what, in the mean time?

All this was very terrible to Steve Speed, and he was almost beside himself with rage, anguish and self-condemnation. That the count could not escape with the wagon without leaving a plain trail which could be followed by daylight, the young man was positive; otherwise, his reason might have given way in his agony of mind and heart.

There was no sign of either wagon or horses.

This was strange, mysteriously so; but Steve resolved that he would not rest until Dora was free.

This time Broquier should not escape death, and that by the rope!

"May Heaven protect my poor Dora!" was the one expression of his heart and soul.

Most depressing and discouraging were the silence and the dark shades; but the scout's mind was far darker—indeed not far removed from hopeless despair.

The men of the train worked nobly to find the outlaws and rescue the maiden so loved by all; but all search proved unavailing.

Dora Dale had been spirited away, leaving neither trace nor trail visible in the moonlight.

Perhaps the morrow would enable some of the many who were interested to find it.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ON TOWARD THE RIO GRANDE.

WE may picture to ourselves the return to consciousness of poor Dora Dale.

As upon a previous occasion, when in the arms of Steve Speed, after her rescue from the maddened steer, the last dread scene was the first to become outlined in her mind's eye.

Over the shoulder of the villainous Broquier, as the latter caught her up and ran toward the wagons, she had seen, to her horror and anguish, her father felled to the ground by Bill Bowers; and this agonizing scene was reproduced in the mind of the poor girl as she regained consciousness.

Clutching at the side of the wagon, she opened her eyes.

Just opposite the appalled maiden sat the count, his serpent-like eyes fixed gloatingly upon her.

With a shudder, she swept a glance around and ahead of the wagon. Instantly she comprehended all the dread realities of her condition.

The mules were galloping at terrific speed, lashed by mounted Mexicans, who rode beside the team, the foam flying from the mouths of all the animals. Amid the galloping horde, Dora recognized her two former captors, and she knew that Steve had been right in his conclusions as to their destination and object, after departing from the Rio Guadalupe. The wagon she knew to be the same which her father had loaned to Broquier.

The snorting steeds, the cracking and lashing of whips, together with the yells and curses of the outlaws were fairly deafening; and the poor maiden had some comfort in knowing that the dastard in front of her could not further annoy her by anything he might choose to say.

The expression upon Broquier's face, however, was such as to cause Dora to shudder convulsively. No attempt did he now make, to mask his real character.

The outrageous act, that he had committed, had placed him beyond the pale of society; which he had, without doubt, entered under an assumed name.

But faint hope had the terrified girl, of escaping a dread fate, which she would thankfully avoid by welcoming death.

Shuddering with the intensity of her fear and horror, she gazed back toward the ribbon of towering timber, and she then felt assured that her captors were proceeding up the Rio Frio, but she believed that the wagon could not be seen from the mouth of the bend, in which was the camp.

She knew that the young scout had gone down the river from the camp, in search of the count and his two confederates. It was plain, therefore, that he must have returned soon after the outlaws had departed into the timber; otherwise the latter would have been seen by Steve and his men.

It was some relief to Dora, to be able to reason in this way.

Steve Speed had not known, that Broquier

had a force of Mexicans brought to the Frio by his two confederates, whom he had, as was now proved, dispatched from the Rio Guadalupe for that purpose.

All was plain to Dora Dale.

Broquier, upon seeing that his plans were to be frustrated, by the course and influence of the young scout, had prepared to carry them out by other means, if necessary.

But the poor girl could not avoid seeing, that she was doomed to a fate too terrible to think of, and from which there appeared to be no escape, except through her own efforts. As she thus looked upon her condition, she vowed that she would brave death in any form—slay her captor, or herself—before yielding to the wishes of such a miscreant!

Perhaps it was the thought of the happiness that might have been—that, possibly, might be hers even yet—that nerved her heart; transforming her from a weak and nervous maiden, to a daring and resolute woman. This change was partially produced by the thoughts of her poor father, as she had last seen him—for all she knew, a corpse! This, too, had been Broquier's work.

Two most strong motives had she, to nerve her in the sudden transformation of feelings she had experienced.

She would avenge her loved father!

The cowardly villain, who had so long tortured his mind, who had eaten at his table, slept beneath his roof, had at last been the means, as it seemed, of his death; or, if living, had plunged him into misery and despair, by depriving him of his one hope in life, his only child!

Again, she belonged to Stephen Speed. She was the young scout's plighted wife; and this vile wretch before her had tortured him to the very soul, by stealing her from him!

Against these criminal outrages, Dora revolted.

The very sight of such degradation and crime, as were imprinted upon the countenance of the dastardly ruffian—proved, too, by his recent acts—created a loathing, a hatred, in the breast of Dora Dale, so intense, that her undaunted gaze and defiant mien fairly astounded him.

He looked at the girl in dumfounded amazement, compelled, at length, to drop his eyes before hers.

Yet on, in mad gallop, went the mules and the mounted outlaws, evidently directed by Lasso Life. He finally caused the team to turn to the south, soon reaching the timber of the Rio Frio, into which all dashed; and Dora's last glance, over the moonlit prairie, disclosed naught that could give hope—nothing but one vast and unbroken savannah, north, east and west!

Into the somber shades, beneath the lofty trees, the branches of which bent with their weight of tangled vines, and the thick festoons of gray moss, they rode. The scene was typical of the dark despair that had ruled poor Dora's mind, typical also of her recent resolutions; for, far down, in places, darted arrows of silvery moonlight, symbolic of the hopes born of her determination to yet balk the cowardly villain, in whose hands she now was.

Winding here and there, through the less dense undergrowth, Lasso Life guided the outfit to a point, where it was possible for a wagon to descend the bank, and ascend on the further side; the river being shallow.

It was with much difficulty, much cursing and lashing, that the crossing was successfully accomplished; the mules being allowed to slake their thirst, and the mustangs of the outlaws as well. Then it was, that poor Dora was forced to pass through an ordeal, which weakened much her resolution, and her hopes.

The villainous Mexicans, now having leisure, directed all their snaky eyes upon her, with vengeful scowls; making the wretched girl shudder, notwithstanding all her efforts at self-control, and at keeping up an appearance of proud disdain.

Two of the Greasers, she saw, were wounded, and she felt positive that some of their number must have been slain.

This, then, accounted for their vengeful looks.

They hated her, for being, as they probably reasoned, the prime cause of the death of their comrades.

Might they not overpower their employers, murder them, and—?

Dora dared not think further on this subject. There was no need of borrowing trouble.

Short was the halt in the river, and lucky for the poor maiden that it was so; as her brave resolves were fast giving way under the gaze of that murderous cavalcade.

Having crossed the river, they proceeded through the belt of timber, on the south side of the stream; and then, breaking from it, again went at speed over the plain.

Afar in front, to the southwest, Dora saw a dark ribbon of timber, and immediately her conversation with Steve, in regard to her father's reasons for locating on the Leona, was recalled.

She now knew that she was being hurried across the triangular section of land between

the Frio and Leona, and but a few miles from the confluence of these rivers, as a glance to the eastward proved; for the two lines of timber united after a gradual approach to each other.

From this Dora was positive that but a short distance intervened between her and the camp of her father; certainly not more than ten miles in a direct line, but a much longer distance as the outlaws had traveled.

But as they had maintained great speed, the young girl felt convinced that it was not yet midnight.

She reasoned that it would not be very difficult to follow the trail of the galloping mules and horses; for, as Dora glanced behind them, influenced thus to do by recalling what Steve had said to her in connection with night-trailing, she saw that a heavy dew was falling, and that the trail was clearly defined. It could easily be followed at a gallop.

This discovery increased the maiden's hopes; for she well knew that the young scout, with a large force, would at once be on the trail.

But Dora knew nothing of the difficulties, at the start, in finding the trail; that no dew was beneath the overhanging branches—the way in which the team had been guided—and that the outlaws had re-crossed the river from the side to which they had retreated with her to the camp; the side on which they still were.

It was evident to Dora that her captors, having crossed the Rio Frio, were now almost free from apprehension in regard to pursuit; for the mules were no longer lashed so terribly, and all traveled at less speed.

All, however, kept on through the timber until they reached an "open" in the same, when a halt was made, and the outlaws began to drink and confer among themselves.

Until this halt the maiden, whose mind had been so occupied with thoughts of her almost hopeless position, had not been aware that she was bound; but, upon moving, she became conscious that cords were not merely around her ankles, but about her waist. The last was slack, but was tightly tied to the bale of blankets upon which she reclined.

She now noticed that quite a wordy dispute had sprung up between the white and yellow outlaws.

She could distinguish the words "camp on the Nueces," and "come back for the gold after the train is gone." These were spoken by Broquier.

What could it mean? Had they been obliged, in their retreat, to drop or secrete the major's money-box? This must be the solution of it.

That she was to be left on the Nueces was ground for hope, as the strength of the party would then be reduced.

Such were Dora Dale's reflections, and she was amazed at herself, and almost indignant at her own calmness and power of banishing the influence of the near past.

She saw one of the Mexicans gallop toward the south, soon returning, having evidently inspected the open plain that stretched afar to the Rio Nueces, and, as far as Dora Dale could judge by his manner and gestures, he had found the "coast clear."

Broquier unloosed the horse that had been taken from Major Dale on the Guadalupe and secured the animal to a tree. Life and Bill also lariat their beasts, and then the trio of whites threw themselves upon the sward, with their saddle-bags before them, with the evident intention of taking a lunch, and all waving their hands in farewell salutation, Broquier calling out:

"We'll overtake you, Gonzales, before you have traveled three miles. *Adios, Miss Dale!*"

"It is hard to part even for a few minutes, when we have enjoyed each other's company so little during our trip. I'll see you later."

With a mocking smile, the ruffian whirled his sombrero about his head and the wagon with its guard of Mexican miscreants sped on through the timber, and over the plain, in a southerly direction, toward the Rio Nueces and Mexico.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THINKING OF TO-MORROW.

THE searchers, led and directed by Stampede Steve, were unsuccessful in finding any trace of the outlaws, and the young scout was nearly distracted. They examined the undergrowth thoroughly, but without success.

Had Steve passed through the timber, on the opposite side of the river, and gazed over the north plain, he would probably have seen the wagon and the outlaws speeding west. But he had not the slightest suspicion that they had crossed the river. So it was, that no one inspected the north plain, until the outlaw outfit had passed beyond the curve of the Frio, and was hidden in the heavy timber.

There was but one comfort. Daylight would favor the following of the trail. The wagon, and such a number of horsemen, would certainly leave a plain trail, which could be very easily followed.

Nearly wild with anxiety, Steve continued his search, tearing through thickets, until there seemed no further use in it. Then he rushed to the camp, and found that Major Dale had

recovered, but was in a dazed state, not seeming to comprehend what had passed, or was passing.

Fearing that the old planter would, upon beholding him, recover sufficiently to ask for Dora, and dreading to explain matters—thus plunging the major into deeper despair—Steve did not remain in his vicinity.

He strode through the camp, and gave directions as to the care of the wounded, the burial of the dead, and the putting of the camp in order. He then selected a dozen men to prepare themselves to dash to the rescue of Dora, and to avenge the death of their comrades.

This done, Steve mounted and sought a fording-place below the camp, passed through the timber and down-stream, his eyes carefully scanning the ground and bushes as he proceeded. For some time he went on in this manner, when suddenly he discovered a bush that had recently been broken.

He slid at once from his saddle.

The wagon had been there.

This was nothing more than he had supposed.

It had been brought over the stream for the purpose of carrying Dora away.

The discovery was not as important as he had thought.

The mind of the young scout had been so warped by his mental suffering that he had lost all skill and perception.

The vehicle had crossed from the north side of the river, it was true, but would the wheels on the south side have, in passing, bent the bush toward the river?

Certainly not!

Then it had re-crossed, and not only that, but at a point nearest to his present position.

In an instant, Steve was in his saddle and spurring madly toward the river. Once there, he saw that the banks on each side were comparatively low.

Again he dismounted, and rushed down to the water's edge.

There, directly at his feet, a bar of moonlight shining upon it as if to point out the course he should proceed, was the plain trail of wagon-wheels, proving that the vehicle had again crossed the river.

The mystery of the disappearance of the outlaws was now explained.

Again mounting, Steve forded the river and spurred through the timber for the north plain, knowing that it was needless to look for other "sign," unless he failed to find trace of the abductors in that quarter.

Fortunately, he happened to emerge from the timber directly at the same point as had the outlaws.

The scout spurred forward, the trail being now clearly defined, thanks to the dew.

Soon it curved abruptly and led west, parallel with the timber of the Frio. Steve could with difficulty repress a cry of joy and relief.

All was now plain as day.

While they had been searching the thickets, the outlaws had escaped in a cunning manner. The wagon had been waiting for them at a certain point on the south side. They had sprung into it with their captive, and sped over to the other side, reasoning, and with good grounds, that their foes, the pursuers, would for some time be engaged in searching on the south side of the stream, during which, by a bold dash, they could escape.

The close pursuit had prevented the outlaws from carrying out their original plan, forcing them to return to the spot whence they had come.

Steve now blamed himself for not having dispatched men to watch for any possible movement of the miscreants on the north plain.

The trail now pointed west, up the Rio Frio, and directly opposite the neck of the bend in which the camp was situated.

The outlaws had shown deep cunning.

They had evidently argued that the camp would be in such confusion, all attention being attracted toward the wagons, that they might pass undetected, and they had accomplished their attempt, as Steve saw at once.

That the ruffian horde would at once strike out toward Mexico, knowing that their safety demanded such a course, the young Texan well knew; consequently, they would not keep on to the westward for any great distance, but would cross the Frio probably above its junction with the Leona, then the latter stream, and thence on toward the Nueces.

Greatly elated and hopeful was the scout, for he now saw a way to outwit and defeat the outlaws, even as they had done him, in recrossing the Frio.

It was not necessary to follow the trail, but to cross the river to the south side, and gallop up the margin of the timber to the confluence of the streams, and thence on up the Rio Leona, cutting off the retreat of the band; the latter, even should they reach the south side of the Leona and dash toward the Nueces, being exposed to the view of their pursuers on the open plain.

Steve gave utterance to a joyful cry, and his

discoveries, and he rode headlong to the camp, galloping directly to the wagons, when he halted and at once dismounted.

At that very moment, as he was about to give a loud signal to gather his picked company of men for the rescue, a shrill and peculiar yell, rung from beyond the river.

Steve knew that it came from Bob Barr, and more, that it was a signal of warning, or of danger. Without a word the scout remounted, spurred down the stream, forded the same, and rode on through the timber toward the point from which the yell had sounded.

Nor did he need a guide, for again and again the signal came, and Steve Speed was strangely amazed and bewildered. He was unable to account for the unexpected alarm, scarce believing it possible that the outlaws had forded the Rio Frio and were already in sight on the south plain.

But he was unable to account for the signal in any other way.

Steve was destined, however, to be not only astonished, but terribly alarmed, and for more reasons than one; for, as he spurred in the direction of the timber Bob Barr sprang in front of his horse, clutching the rein, and bringing the animal to a halt, as he cried out:

"Jump to dirt, Steve, lively! Gaze out over ther perrarer, sorter east-like. Dog-gone my ole heart ef hellishness ain't sprinkled 'roun' hyerabouts purty thick 'bout now!"

"In Heaven's name, what do you mean, Bob?" asked the young man, springing from his horse.

"Yer'll friz yer peepers onter what I means mighty speedy, I reckon!" returned Bob Barr. "Great Lord!"

The ejaculation burst from the scout's lips, in mingled amazement, concern and anxiety.

Then he cried out:

"Leave the horse, Bob! Run, man! Run, and order the men to hitch up, and strike out on the back trail, over the south plain!"

"Tel all, that life or death depends upon the obeying of my order, and that instantly!"

"All will be massacred, if they remain in camp a half hour longer! Run, man! Run!"

"What next, I wonder, in Heaven's name? And, even if we escape detection, poor Dora's doom is sealed!"

Well might Steve thus express himself, for, to the southeast, out on the moonlit plain, was a large party of horsemen, speeding directly toward the Rio Frio—toward the point where he stood.

It need but once glance from his practiced eyes to know that they were Indians—that a large war party of Apaches were thundering toward him, feathers and hair flaunting, and their war gear and equipments glittering in the moonlight!

Some two hundred, Steve estimated them to be—two hundred paint-daubed demons eager for blood, dashing madly over the plain!

He could not bear the fearful sight, even at a distance and know that the lives of so many helpless women and children depended upon the immediate departure of the train.

The Indians might camp on the south side of the stream, and not discover the camp of the whites for some time; but, discovered it would be, and that meant death to all, for there were not enough fighting men to defend the train from such a strong war-party. The Apaches, besides, would fight like demons, for such a rich prize, and so many scalps.

Agonized by these probabilities, Steve secured his horse to a limb, and rushed to the camp; where to his relief, he found that the women and children, with the blankets and camp tricks, had been already placed in the wagons, and the mules harnessed.

Well trained were the teamsters, or this would not have been accomplished in thrice the length of time. The young scout rushed around the circle of wagons, crying out:

"Not a word, men; and don't crack your whips!"

"Strike straight north, clear from view from this timber, and then camp, in the same manner as here, on the open plain, until you hear from me."

"Keep calm, and all will, I hope, be well."

"If it comes to a fight, we have more chances on the plain than here. Shake ribbons, and git!"

One by one, the wagons rolled out from the bend, in a long line; and struck out, over the plain, toward the north, on their back trail. They took care to make no noise, that could be detected, even at the point from which Steve Speed had gazed out upon the south plain, at the Apache war-party.

Steve's thoughts now turned to Major Dale; but, as the tent of poor Dora had been placed in a wagon, the scout supposed that the old planter had been lifted into the same vehicle.

He also thought of Nero, Dora's favorite horse, and felt worried because he had not seen the animal secured as usual to the feed-box at the rear of the wagon, which the unfortunate maiden had occupied. But the young man presumed that the horse had been tied to some other vehicle, and he rushed back over the log foot-bridge; little dreaming that Major Dale

had been left behind by the wagon-train, and Nero as well.

Such, indeed, was the case; for the old planter, having recovered sufficiently to realize from the conversation of the people of the train that his daughter had been again abducted—this time by the miscreant, Broquier—had, at the very time Bob Barr rushed into camp with his startling announcement and imperative orders, stolen away into the undergrowth.

He led with him Nero, the connecting link between himself and his child. There, in the dark shades, the bereaved father went, in his half-insane state, to moan and weep in silence.

Steve, the Scout, rushed at once to his horse, and unloosing the lariat, held it in hand while he stepped forward, and peered from the undergrowth.

The sight that met his view was one that was well calculated to chill the very marrow in his bones with horror; but it was neither a new nor a strange sight to Stampede Steve.

CHAPTER XXIX.

APACHES ON THE TRAIL.

As Steve Speed gazed out upon the fast-approaching horde of savages, the teamster came up.

"Hold up, pard Steve!" he said, quickly; "dog-gone my ole heart, ef Bob Barr's goin' ter 'low yer ter run this hull biz alone. Hyer I am, nag an' fixin's, all ready. I'm with yer, Steve, on this trail, bet yer brains!"

"Bob," returned the young scout, "why did you come? You are needed to run the train."

"I opine ther train kin take keer of itself, a blamed sight better'n Miss Dora kin!"

"I fear we can do nothing for her," said Steve, hopelessly.

"What's ther reason, pard?"

"Look at those red devils! That is your answer!"

"I doesn't undercomstan' what ther cussed 'Paches hes gut ter do with ther leetle gal."

"I see, Bob, that I have not explained to you my discoveries. I found the trail. The outlaws had recrossed the river, and sped directly past the entrance to the bend, while we were beating the bush on this side of the stream."

"We know, therefore, that they will advance up the Frio but a short distance: for they will point by the most direct route to Mexico."

"They dare not proceed further west than is necessary to avoid being seen on the south plain by us. Now, if the Apaches pass up the Leona, there is little hope for Dora Dale, for those keen-eyed braves will see the outlaws if they have taken to the plain, and ten chances to one will discover them if they encamp on the Leona."

"Their mustangs are quite fagged, and the red demons will soon camp. Had I not felt sure of this, I would not have given the orders I did. They are quartering directly to this point, and I would not take any risks."

"Now, I perceive they are swerving more westerly, and nearly parallel with the river."

"Bob, I believe that Miss Dale is in more danger than the people of the train, even had they remained in camp. But if the fiends do take her, it will cost them dear."

"I care not if you know it, Bob—I love the girl, and she loves me!"

Deep and impressive were these words.

"Dog-gone my ole heart, pard Steve, did ye think I were blind? I know'd hit all along."

"Never g'in up, Steve! I'm with yer until the Panama freezes up. Howsomever, I doesn't reckon we'll hev much show ter keep our thatches onter our brain-boxes ef we hes a tussle wi' that crowd o' ha'r-tearers."

"But I'm with yer, Steve! I allers s'posed I'd be laid out by a cussed 'Pache, an' I begin ter reckon ther time's nigh 'bout 'roved."

"We could not die in a better cause," said the scout in a firm voice. "Here they come like a whirlwind! Sink lower, for their eyes are keen!"

As Steve Speed spoke the war-party were within two hundred yards, and dashing madly up along the line of timber.

Few men would have had the nerve to maintain their positions—not ten yards distant—as did the scout and the teamster.

The danger was that the neighing of their horses would betray their presence.

Steve instantly thought of that, and turning to Bob, pointed to the animals, at the same time pulling the loose kerchief from his neck and bounding to his steed, the teamster following his example.

And none too soon were they, for both horses, their heads raised and ears pricked forward, gave every indication of neighing. The two men spoke softly and bound the handkerchiefs around the nostrils of the nags, soothing them by stroking their heads.

It was dark where they stood, and the plain was illumined by the moon, consequently the Apaches, in all their dread and terrible hideousness, could be clearly seen.

On they came like the rush of a wild stampede of mustangs. On they plunged in a mingled mob, their half-naked forms bent forward, swaying in their peculiar saddles, and their keen eyes darting glances ahead.

It was a perfect picture of savage war.

Not a sound came from any lip in all that hideous horde.

The hiss and whack of the quirts, and the swish of hoofs through the grass and flowers, the rattle of arrows in the dry-hide quivers, the tinkle of silver trinkets, together with the tremulous rumble of the earth—these were the sounds that would have betrayed to any one to the manner born who and what were passing, though he were blindfolded.

Thus, on dashed the savage war-party, without cessation of the cruel quirt-hiss and thwack; thus on, past the two trembling men, and up the river, like hideous demons, all athirst for blood, although no foe was in view!

But Stampede Steve well understood the cause of the mad and vengeful rage, that ruled the paint-daubed horde.

Evidence was before him, which explained the fury of the red riders; for, in the rear of the on-plunging mob of braves, were at least a dozen mustangs, upon the backs of which were bound their dead and blood-smeared masters; upon whose sightless eyes the moon now played—a most repulsive and horrid spectacle—while as many more bore evidence of wounds received in battle.

These were in the rear of the corpse-laden beasts, which they urged forward; the animals, at times, casting their heads around, and snorting in fright at the strange load upon their backs, and the scent of human blood.

And yet another sight, which caused the two lurkers to shudder with horror, was there in that on-galloping war-party.

This was a white man, evidently a Texan ranchero, fast bound on the back of a mustang, in the midst of the savage mass.

A low groan broke from the lips of Steve and Bob, as they perceived the captive.

"Thet pore fellow's wounded," whispered the teamster; "Lord help him, fer he's gut a heap o' tortur' afore him!"

"It's a terrible sight, Bob; enough to make many a man faint in his tracks."

"Yes, that captive is wounded, and cannot be taken to the Rio Grande for torture; consequently, they'll have their merciless revenge on him, at the next camp. That is what they are anticipating."

"They are infuriated at the loss of their braves, and are thirsting for the cries of agony from their one captive. They have met with strong resistance on their raid, and not far below this place."

"Bob, those demons will keep on to the Leona—I feel it in my very soul—and Dora will fall a victim to the painted fiends of the Pecos!"

"Ef things hes bin movin' es yer puts 'em up, hit does look kinder dubious fer ther leetle gal; an' I reckon, we'll hev ter glide up ther drink, though hit's pokerish biz, an' air calkerlated ter make a pilgrim's ha'r crawl plum off'n his head!"

Steve had advanced nearer the outer edge of the undergrowth, and was, with torturing anxiety, gazing up the line of timber, at the on-speeding horde of Apaches. Bob continued:

"Thar's no show fer we-uns ter foller, without bein' diskivered; and then we can't do any good ter pore Miss Dora. I opine we'd better cross ther drink, an' jist everlastin'ly git up, an' dust west'ard, until we gits 'bove ther p'int whar ther Leona glides inter ther Frio."

"Then we kin skute 'cross both o' ther rivers, goin' slow an' easy later on. Dog-gone my heart, ef we can't 'rove purty nigh es quick es ther painted red niggers yunder!"

"Good boy, Bob!" returned Steve, eagerly; "that's just our programme to the letter. I'm in such a tortured state of mind, that I hardly know which end my head's on."

"Mount, and away, pard! We'll do our best!"

"This is terrible; but, by all the gods, that villain, Broquier, or Dusky Dick, shall feel my vengeance, if he escapes the Apaches—even though it may take years to trail him to earth!"

"On, Bob! on! Dora, or death, is our war-cry!"

And through the dark shades, and through the inky waters of the Rio Frio, the two dashed with a determination to do, or die.

On, until the south plain was reached; and then they dashed headlong up the border of the line of timber that screened them from the view of the Apache fiends—the same friendly ribbon of timber preventing the war-painted demons from discovering the long line of "prairie schooners," afar on the north plain, and which seemed hardly to move; although Steve and Bob knew that the drivers were lashing the mules at full speed to gain as long a distance as was possible from the war-party.

"Pard Steve," said the teamster, "hit was lucky yer tole 'em ter camp on ther perrarer, es long es ther smoky sons o' Satan didn't git a peep at 'em. Ef we hed 'em all hyer, 'ceptin' ther weemin an' children, mebbe so we c'u'd wipe out ther beft o' ther varmints."

"They'd kill nine-tenths of the men with the train, and those all have families. I tell you, Bob, it would be terrible!"

"I hope I shall never again bear such shrieks and screams as those women and children uttered, when I rode into camp, over their dead. These emigrants are not bordermen. They

never saw Indians, and would stampede at the charge of such a strong war-party."

"I reckon ye're 'bout kerrect, Steve; an' hit 'u'd be a pity ter run 'em inter sich a lay-out o' hellyuns. Git, ole nag! Mebbe so this air ther last time I'll straddle yer."

This last remark was made by Bob Barr to his horse, Steve still gazing ahead most anxiously, as they dashed headlong around the curve in the Rio Frio, and a far western view was thus opened.

But, there was nothing there to back that view.

"The miscreants have crossed to the Leona," exclaimed the young scout, "I really do believe!"

"What, oh, what will become of my darling!"

"Bear me, oh, bear me on, my noble steed to her side, even though a thousand red and yellow demons surround her!"

Bob saw that his pard was getting to be more and more excited each mile. His eyes were glaring, and his strength seemed to be gathered for a great shock; his teeth, at times, grinding with the intensity of his emotions.

At times he cast a look at Bob, that was expressive of the misery that ruled him; a look that the teamster could not bear to meet, but masticated his tobacco vigorously, and expectorated spitefully in the direction of the Apaches.

Soon they were west of the confluence of the rivers, and immediately after crossed the Frio, speeding on over the triangular prairie toward the southwest, Steve in his mind calculating the distance traveled by the Apaches, and aiming to strike a point as nearly in their vicinity as was possible.

When within a mile of the Leona, the scout suddenly halted and called out in great excitement:

"See! there is the wagon-trail. The movements of the outlaws have been just as I reasoned!"

"Skute!" was the prompt rejoinder. "I'm with you, Steve, dang my ole heart ef I ain't, till I'm called!"

And over the clearly-defined trail, where wheels and hoofs had whisked the dew from the tall grass, on went the determined rescuers, sparing not spurs, and soon dashing into the dark shades that bordered the Leona. Then they both drew rein, and stole stealthily on, crossing the stream after passing the belt of timber on the north side.

Between them and the Apaches there were now but a few hundred yards of trees and undergrowth.

But within that space the outlaws, and the wagon with Dora, might be.

If they were beyond on the plain the maiden would without doubt become a captive to the savages.

Should this be, the young scout was also doomed, for he had resolved to attempt her rescue, and die with, rather than live without her.

Dismounting and securing their horses, they went on with still more caution, on foot.

Suddenly Steve clutched the arm of the teamster, and whispered in his ear.

"The major's horse! They are near at hand. Brace yourself, Bob, for a headlong charge, and fight, but don't kill Broquier or his pard, Lasso Lije!"

"Skip on," was the reply. "I'm on the war-path!"

Jerking bowies and revolvers, they now stole forward; but no men could be seen near the animals, three of which they discovered. There were also three saddle-bags open on the ground, as if the owners had just left them, after partaking of their contents.

Broquier and his two confederates were before them.

They were gazing toward the plain, and listening intently.

Well did Steve Speed know what they had heard.

It was the Apache war-party!

The wagon was not to be seen, and the actions of the three ruffians indicated that it was on the plain.

There was no time to lose.

Dora, or death, must be the war-cry!

Like hungry panthers leaping upon their prey, Steve and Bob sprung forward, and Broquier and Lije fell beneath the blows delivered with the revolver-butts of the infuriated avengers.

The next moment Steve's knife was buried to the hilt in the breast of Bill Bowers.

"Tie the cusses up, and then away, Bob!" yelled the scout; "Dora is on the plain, and so are the fiendish Apaches!"

Instantly the count and Lije were bound fast to the trunks of trees with their own lariats, taken from their saddles. This was done so firmly, from ankle to neck, that escape was impossible.

Both the miscreants were still senseless.

Then, with a loud cry of, "To the rescue!" Steve rushed to the side of his horse, tore loose the lariat, sprung into his saddle, and drove spurs. Bob Barr was not far behind, and both dashed toward the timber.

The next minute, for the distance was short, a soul-torturing scene broke on the view of the two sworn avengers.

Out on the plain, perhaps a mile from them, was the wagon, speeding back toward the timber, having evidently turned about. The Mexicans were lashing the mules at terrific speed, while to the eastward, and quartering to cut the outlaws and wagon off, was the Apache war-party!

The Indians were lashing their foam-flecked mustangs furiously; and, as Steve and Bob broke from the timber, the blood-curdling war-whoop, from nearly two hundred throats, shot through the night air, in exultation, and in awful power and meaning.

CHAPTER XXX.

DORA, OR DEATH.

NOT an instant did Steve and Bob hesitate, although the scene and sounds were sufficiently horrible to appall the stoutest heart. Forward they galloped, toward the oncoming wagon and the miscreant Mexicans.

In some manner Dora Dale had freed herself from her bonds, a not very difficult task, as it had not been considered necessary to tie her wrists together.

As she sprung to her feet the poor girl gazed in horror at the horde of war-painted Apaches, who now dashed toward the wagon in an overwhelming mass.

At the very moment that Dora glanced toward the timber, out from the same dashed two horsemen, the mien and bearing of one proving him to be the man of all men to her—Stephen Speed, the Scout.

For that brief instant a feeling of intense happiness crowded out all consciousness of the fearful dangers by which she was environed. Relief and joy inexpressible were hers. But the next moment a piercing shriek of insupportable horror rung out from her trembling lips; for she fully realized that the brave and daring young man was galloping madly to death—speeding frantically, to die by her side—thus, as never man before, proving his love, by rushing voluntarily to a terrible death!

The scene was indeed a horrible one.

The Mexicans, with set teeth, trembling lips and faces of a yellowish pallor, muttered prayers as they lashed their mules in frenzied gallop, the foam flying on all sides.

In close pursuit, with fiendish yells and whoops, dashed a perfect avalanche of mustangs, wild-eyed, and snorting with pain and frenzy. Upon them were the murder-mad riders, with their flying hair and feathers—a sight never to be forgotten, as they seemed to fly over the grassy and moonlit prairie!

But the one most grand and imposing feature of that terrible scene was the two daring Texans galloping to certain death, each erect in his saddle, each with a desperate daring so strongly ruling him, that he scorned the fate to which he was rushing headlong. The eyes of both were fixed upon the form of that angelic maiden, clinging to the wagon, her wealth of hair flying free before her face. They were drowning all thought of self, and were resolved to die in avenging Dora's terrible wrongs if rescue was impossible!

Yet in the face of all these appalling facts, it was not in the mental make-up of either Steve Speed or Bob Barr to be hopeless. They aimed to cut down the Mexicans, secure Dora, and then gallop west toward the timber, trusting in the comparative freshness of their horses to distance the hellish horde.

And nearer drew the three parties to each other at terrific bounds, the Apaches having the disadvantage in distance. But no eye-witness could have decided with any accuracy what would be the actual ending of events so near at hand, except that the two Texans and the Greasers must meet before the Indians could get within fair bow-shot.

But as these two parties were dashing toward each other, it was impossible to decide what would be the result.

When, however, Steve and Bob reached a point where the features of Dora could be plainly discerned, her eyes fixed pleadingly yet filled with terror upon them—when they thus realized the awful position of the poor girl more fully, they thrust their revolvers more loosely beneath their belts in front, jerked their bowies and drove spurs.

The Mexicans, appalled at the Apache war-whoops, and at the onward charge of the two Texans—it seeming to them more the act of madmen than of those having common sense—appeared incapable, or else undecided, as to what they should do.

Seeing that the Texans were periling themselves in order that they might if possible secure the captive maiden, the outlaws, as if by common consent, shot away from the wagon and mules, westward toward the river.

The terrified mules, thus abandoned, circled about, and went galloping madly over the back trail.

With fierce whoops and yells, the Apaches divided, one-half speeding after the Mexicans,

and the other toward the wagon and the two Texans.

The mules had been so unmercifully lashed, that they did not maintain, after starting over the open plain, the rate of speed as formerly, and consequently, Steve and Bob fast closed up; but suddenly the mules swerved easterly, giving the Apaches less ground to cover—and the crisis had come!

No longer was there any hope in the breasts of our two friends that they could gain the timber with Dora. The turning about of the mules had made this impossible. Death awaited them and a fate far worse than death for the captive girl!

But, to reach Dora, for one last farewell, was the one wish and hope remaining in the breast of Steve, and he yelled to his pard:

"Fly, Bob! Fly! You may escape to tell them how Dora and I died. Fly and avenge us hereafter!"

"Force Broquier to confess himself the author of the crime he laid at the door of Major Dale. Go at once, I command you! Dora and I must die!"

Bob gave one look into Steve's eyes, and knew that the young scout would not attempt to save himself. Then it occurred to him, that the Apaches might capture Dora and Steve, and there was still hope of their rescue.

Could he escape he might lead a force on the trail, and they might yet be saved. There was one chance in a thousand. So Bob Barr obeyed.

Hardly had the teamster gone two hundred yards, the Apaches giving vent to their fury at his evident attempt to escape them—which it appeared, might be successful—when the hind axle-tree of the wagon parted from the body; the latter falling to the earth, and Dora being hurled out upon the sward.

At the same time, one of the mules fell, and the fagged team came to a stop.

A moment after, Steve sprung from his horse, caught up Dora's senseless form, and laid her carefully beneath the wagon-body, between the hind part, which rested upon the ground, and the prostrate mule; in such a position that the hoofs of the Apache mustangs could not touch it.

The young man then bounded upon his horse, his face pale as death; but his glance was keen, and vengeful, and his mien daring.

With a revolver in each hand, and a bowie between his teeth, he drove spurs, and dashed at full speed toward the oncoming horde of Apaches; guiding his horse by a pressure of either knee.

Even that savage horde of merciless Apaches were so overcome with admiration at this exhibition, this desperate charge of one man—and he a hated pale-face—upon two hundred of their number, all of whom had arrows fitted to bow-string, that their vengeful yells were changed to whoops of admiration. But these were the last whoops that many of them ever gave.

Stampede Steve thundered upon their front, spurts of fire marking his course, and the rattling reports of revolvers sending leaden balls tearing into the thickly-massed savages. The mustangs plunged madly, when their death-stricken masters slipped from the saddles; their cries of agony filling the air, mingled with the crashing of hoofs through their bones, as the animals trampled them in their flight!

A perfect cyclone of death marked Steve's charge, and when his revolvers were empty, he hurled them at the nearest Indians, clutched his bowie, and, like an avenging god, plunged further into the vortex of hideous war-painted braves; but a war club whirled through the air, and struck the daring scout upon the head, while a knife pierced his shoulder, and he fell among those whose war cries he had hushed forever!

Not a brave had bent bow, so grand, heroic, and imposing, had been the dash, to revenge and death, of Stampede Steve. When he fell from his horse, among the red braves he had slain, and several young warriors springing from their mustangs, with knives in hand, to scalp and mutilate him; then, a signal whoop from the chief caused them to remount, in seeming shame.

In loud tones the Apache leader cried out:

"Heap big brave—great warrior! Fight like warrior. Fight like chief. Must die like chief. It is enough. Lone Wolf has spoken!"

At once the scene became changed.

The mules were unharnessed, and the valuables taken from the wagon and packed upon them.

The dead were secured upon their mustangs, and a hole was dug in the plain, at the direction of the Apache chief. The hind axle-tree with its two wheels was rolled toward this hole, one of the wheels being then removed and the axle thrust into the hole. The wheel was cast into the wagon-body, and the heel of the tongue secured to one of the spokes of the wheel which had been left on the axle-tree and was some three feet above the ground.

Then one mule, which had been reserved from the team, was hitched to the wagon—

tongue; the animal's head being also secured to the tree of the wheel, further around, with a slack rope.

This forced the mule, when in motion, to go round in a circle, revolving the wheel as it went, in the same manner as beasts are secured to cotton-gins or the old style of cider-mills. These arrangements were soon made.

Then the senseless form of Stephen Speed was held by braves up to the wheel, on the opposite side from the mule. He was then bent crescent-like and tightly bound to the wheel, his face turned outward, thus causing it to be impossible for him, when he regained consciousness, to see the mule, that might or might not be in motion, and making him revolve with the wheel.

The knowledge that the victim must for a long time suffer caused many, who would have clamored for a death-torture before their eyes, and in which all should take a hand, to utter complimentary ejaculations in regard to Lone Wolf, he being the originator of the strange but most excruciating and prolonged torture.

The chief had certainly kept his word.

Stampede Steve was to die the death of a warrior, and one that would tax his fortitude to the utmost—a death of torture, so terrible that none could conceive of its torments.

Bound in a most painfully-unnatural position, whirled about until his brain would feel as though ten thousand needles were darting through it, his eyes like coals of fire, and his thirst too terrible to think of—thus was he left, to endure the scorching sun on the morrow, when his brain would seem as molten lead!

No sooner had their captive been thus satisfactorily secured than Dora Dale was placed in the arms of a mounted Apache, at an order from the chief. Then the wagon was set on fire, and away went the Apache horde toward the Rio Leona, there to participate in the torture of the Mexican captives, taken, or supposed to have been, by the other portion of the war-party.

Bob Barr was nowhere within view.

High in air shot the forked and lurid flames of the burning wagon, snapping and seething, and frightening the mule, that now rushed frantically around and around; whirling poor Steve Speed, still unconscious, but to whom this unconsciousness was a blessing unspeakable.

Better for the brave scout to remain thus, than to revive, and see the flashing flames; to realize his dread position, to suffer the tortures of the lost, to have his brain torn and his heart broken with thoughts of poor Dora Dale—of Dora, either dead, or worse still, being borne afar to the Rio Pecos; that cross stream which, he knows, she will never recross!

Yes, better thus, senseless Steve! Than awaken to such torment and poignant anguish, as the facts in connection with the near past become realized, or recalled to your demoralized brain, will but too soon occasion.

Better thus, than awaken to tortures of the body, that, strong and sinewy as you are, and endowed with a fortitude such as few on earth can claim, must equal the agonies that convulse the souls of the lost!

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE TABLES TURNED.

BRIEFLY will we relate the facts that occurred during the remainder of that eventful night.

The portion of the Apache war-party that had gone in chase of the outlaw Mexicans—always able to get more speed from a mustang than a Greaser can—succeeded in reaching the dark shades but a moment after the outlaws.

Then followed fearful yells and whoops, as, in a long line, the Indians lashed their steeds, crashing through the undergrowth, and forcing the Mexicans to the river; the bank of which, at that point, happened to be high and steep.

The horses of the outlaws refused to plunge over, regardless of the cruelly driven spurs.

Steel pointed shafts now shot through the air, and cries of agony and terror mingled with the exultant whoops of the savage horde, which now closed in on the cut-throats of the Rio Grande.

Not one of the Mexicans escaped that terrible volley of arrows, yet none were killed outright; although it would have been far better for them had the shafts pierced their hearts.

They were dragged from their mustangs, howling in terror, bound, and borne back to the verge of the timber; about the same time that Bob Barr, about a mile further west, shot into the timber, and escaped the Indians in pursuit.

On the verge of the timber, the successful Apaches halted, with the Mexican captives; all of whom were badly wounded.

Then it was that the flames of the burning wagon shot upward, and those of the war-party who had bound Steve to the wheel, and had poor Dora in their midst, all came galloping to join their comrades, their exultant whoops joining the others and filling the air.

Three of the Apaches, wounded in some previous fight, and who were in charge of the corpses of their comrades slain in the same

fight, also approached up the border of the timber to join their fellow braves.

From the course the Mexicans had taken in their desperate attempt at escape, entering the timber a mile or more above the point at which they had emerged from it with the wagon, the two wretches, Broquier and Lasso Lije, were left alone in their misery, tied fast to the tree-trunks, as Steve and Bob had left them.

Had not the Apaches been confident that the Mexican outlaws had stolen the wagon, freight, mules and maiden from some ranch, and that they had been followed by the two Texans, they would, without doubt, have examined the back trail of the party following the same, in hopes that other wagons might be in the vicinity. But, as they paid no attention to this, it proved that they had no suspicions in regard to other whites being in that retired section of the frontier.

Had one of the braves passed through the Leona timber, and gazed over the triangular prairie which lay between them and the Rio Frio, he would have seen, afar over that plain, a horseman, none other than Bob Barr, still urging his horse at terrific speed, nearly to the Rio timber.

This might have aroused suspicions in the mind of an Indian; for why should Bob keep up such speed after gaining a safe distance from his enemies, if he were not hastening for aid to rescue the captive girl?

But luckily the Apaches had no spy out in any direction, probably as much from their having already, on account of being incumbered with their dead, decided upon an immediate return to some favorite spot for the interment of the bodies—some cave that was considered by them "Good Medicine."

When the war-party again came together there was no time wasted. The wounded Mexicans were bound upon their mustangs by the orders of Lone Wolf, the latter having decided to postpone the torture until they should encamp. This would make it a protracted torture to the captives, every bound of their mustangs causing agony from the feathered shafts, which were allowed purposely to remain in their wounds, thus affording great pleasure on the gallop to the merciless Apaches of the Rio Pecos.

Some delay was occasioned by the war-party's seeking an easy point at which to descend the bank of the Leona to give their horses drink; and after the start, they were obliged to travel slowly on account of the laden animals and the fagged state of their mustangs as well.

Back to the one lone object on the broad moonlit plain—the wheel of torture, upon which poor Steve Speed was bound—went the painted horde. The chief was evidently vain of the new and peculiar mode which he had invented, of sending his victim on the "long dark trail," with ample time to realize that such was his doom; and he wished those of his braves who had not been present at the time, to see the gratifying and singular spectacle.

The wagon had, by this time, been consumed; nothing but the iron work, and a few smoking and smouldering embers remaining.

When the war-party came up, the scout was still senseless, and the affrighted mule had already worn a deep circular trail in the sward.

The scene was a fearful one, and therefore gave great pleasure and satisfaction to the red torturers, who gave vent to their feelings in whoop and yell. Yet these sounds, so dread terrific, and startling, were unheard by the victim who was bound on the wheel.

For a time the paint-daubed demons sat their mustangs, gazing at the frantic and foam-flecked mule; the eyes of the poor brute, blood-shot and glaring, and its tongue projecting from its mouth, on account of the thirst, which had been trebled by the heat of the flames—a thirst which must soon torture the human victim as well.

With a peculiar yell, Lone Wolf jerked jaw-strap, his quirt hissed about his head, and away he shot to the westward, over the plain, followed by his war-painted braves; feathers and hair flaunting and flying wild, quirts hissing and whacking, mustangs snorting and madly plunging onward; bearing their savage masters over the plain, while their yells of triumph filled the prairie air!

Following close in the rear, galloped the wild-eyed mustangs, with their horrid ghastly burdens—their dead masters, whose last war-cries had sounded.

Steve, the Scout, was left alone, upon the vast prairie; alone, in his agony of mind and body, when mind should recover from the terrible blow of the war-club. While, galloping toward the west, went those who had condemned him to that awful death; and, bearing in their midst the death like form of poor Dora Dale—she, too, unconscious for the time, thank God! of her dread surroundings, and of the doom to which her lover and hero had been condemned.

And, while these scenes of horror had been transpiring, slowly, up along the border of the timber, on the south side of the Rio Frio, rode an old man; his long gray hair disheveled, his

eyes bent on the ground in a stony stare, his thin, pinched features the pallor of death!

He was following the plain trail of the Apache war-party.

There was an insane anguish stamped upon his face that was torturing to behold.

It was Major Duncan Dale, and he was mounted upon Nero, his daughter's horse.

Nero seemed, to a certain extent, to be aware that, not only had he one upon his back that never before bestrode him, but one the very opposite of his young mistress, for the horse ambled steadily along, his head erect, his eyes gazing suspiciously into the dark shades, and out upon the plain.

No playful tossing of the head and prancing did Nero indulge in, evidently realizing that such proceedings would be ill-timed on the present occasion.

At times Major Dale would sit erect in his saddle, his eyes would flash with fury, and his hand clench, and be raised upward, as his lips moved in whispered prayer.

Then he would sink, listless, forward, clutching the saddle-horn to support his swaying form; and again he would fix that insane and stony stare upon the trail, as if he saw strange and harrowing pictures upon the trampled sward.

Thus, on and on, along the Rio Frio timberline, and up the border of the dark shades that marked the course of the Rio Leona; at length reaching a point where, had he gazed westward, he would have seen a dark mass, slowly moving over the moonlit plain toward the horizon line.

It was the Apache war-party, and his darling, his only child, was in their midst!

But the old planter saw nothing, except the sward beside Nero; not even that strange object to the south—the only break upon the plain—the circling mule, the wheel and the tortured victim of Apache cruelty!

But something at length caught the old man's eye, and he straightened up in his saddle, jerked Nero toward the dense shades of the Leona, and, for the first time, drove spurs.

The major had caught sight of the wagon-trail, as it had dashed from the timber, in charge of the Mexican outlaws. Into the shades he dashed, but was brought to a halt by the sound of human voices in prayerful appeal:

"For God's sake, cut us loose!"

"Hyer we be, an' Satan c'd'n't ha' tortured us wuss! We're white, an' hes lin tied, an' lef' ter die, by ther cussed reds!"

"Quick, I say! Cut us loose, will you?"

"Shet yer mouth, Dick! Gi'n ther stranger a show ter think. Hit's nat'ral fer him ter be skeered, er sot back; bein' yelped et this-a-way, when he didn't s'pose any humans war hyer, in this pokerish hole—s'peshly in sich a fix!"

Major Dale sprung from his horse.

He had been in shadow, but he now stepped within a bar of moonlight, opposite the two miscreants.

He had recognized their voices!

Both men now recognized him!

The eyes of the wronged old man glared.

The villains uttered yells of abject terror.

Then, as the old planter had, on a previous occasion, sprung upon Bill Bowers, at the Rio Guadalupe, so bounded he now upon Broquier, his long, bony fingers clutching the ruffian's neck.

Not a word spoke he, from the first.

Black in the face, became the swarthy count; but, when choked to unconsciousness, the major removed his grip, and sprung to the front of Lasso Lije, who yelled:

"Satan tortur' yer! What did—"

That was all. Then came dread sounds, as of a human being dying in agony.

These sounds lasted not long.

Both Lije and Dick were nearly strangled.

Then Major Dale threw himself upon the ground, in front of the two miscreants, his elbows on the sward, and his wild eyes fixed upon his victims.

The cowardly wretches were in the power of the old man, whom they had so terribly wronged.

Major Dale's moment of victory and revenge had arrived; yet too late, for Dora, his darling daughter, was gone!

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE TORTURE ENDS.

BUT not long lay Major Dale upon the sward, for he sprung erect, removed the equipments from Nero, and secured the neck-rope to a sapling; giving the horse ample slack to feed.

Then the old planter perceived the saddle-bags, and finding food therein, ate to his satisfaction.

Much refreshed, he searched the undergrowth for some time, paying no attention to the villains. Broquier and Lije; who had recovered, but dared not utter a word, for fear of attracting the old man's attention, when a repetition of their recent experience might be expected.

Long the major searched, even to the river, for the wagon—for some trace of his daughter—but without success, as the darkness revealed no trail.

At length, utterly wearied out, he returned,

and stretching himself upon the sward, fell into a deathlike slumber, just as the gray shades of coming morn shot up in the east.

All through that long forenoon, and into the middle of the afternoon, slept the old planter, while the southern sun blazed down mercilessly, blistering the flesh of the tortured scout, bound upon the wheel, on the open plain; and even the more favored miscreants, bound to the trees, were parched with thirst and half-famished, while the tightly-drawn ropes pained them exceedingly.

Yet their curses were low and muttered, for they feared awakening the man they had so wronged, and whose fury knew no bounds.

And Lasso Lije glared with murderous hatred upon his old pard, hissing curses at Dusky Dick for having brought him to such a fix.

Broquier trembled, for he knew that to gain favor with the major, his infuriated partner in crime would betray any and all secrets.

Both had suffered to the very extreme of human endurance, when the fearful whoops of the Apaches had rung on the plain, and the sounds of revolver-shots had caused them to believe that Bob and Steve had been slain. This would cause the Indians to follow their back trail, and they would be discovered.

They had heard the rattle of the wagon and the yells of their Mexican allies, and had been confident that the Greasers were all captured, and the maiden as well.

They had also detected the glare of the burning wagon, and felt certain that discovery, torture and death awaited them.

They had wrenched at their ropes in fury and terror, bruising their flesh still more; but the strongly tied lariats had only been made tighter by their frantic exertions. Through all the savage commotion on the plain the two ruffians had been most terribly agonized, expecting each moment to behold the war-painted warriors dart, with wild whoops, from the dark shades, upon them.

And then, after all had become still, and they had decided that the Indians had departed, and that they were safe from the red demons—then, after a short respite from their terrors, there had burst in upon them, one whom they had believed to be cold and dead; one whom, in their present helpless condition, they dreaded most to see; one whom they had wronged in the most dastardly manner, and whose merciless vengeance would be but just.

Well could the cowardly pair of villains realize that if the mills of the gods grind slowly, yet when those deities do set in for real business they make it lively, and grind exceedingly fine—that, in short, "the way of the transgressor is hard."

At last they heard a crashing of bushes, and knowing that none could appear except enemies, they shuddered with horror and dread; but they were at once relieved, by beholding the equipped posse of Stampede Steve dash into the little "open."

This awakened the old planter.

Major Dale sprung to a sitting posture, and glared around in a dazed and bewildered manner; at length he fastened his eyes upon his old foes, and his amazement merged into merciless hatred. The wretches cringed and trembled when they recalled the terrible assault of the old man upon them the previous night.

But the intelligent horse of the young scout cantered on its way to Nero, and manifested great pleasure, drawing the attention of the old planter, who seemed strangely moved by the discovery and recognition of Steve's horse. This animal, as well as Nero, recalled to the major all that he had lost.

The miscreants saw that the old man's head was smeared with blood, the same having also dripped over his garments, giving him a horrible appearance; the pallor of his face contrasting so strongly with the blood.

Long sat the old planter, in a daze.

At length, he crawled to the saddle-bags, and again ate and drank; thus causing the almost famished wretches, who watched him, to be tantalized almost to insanity.

Steve Speed's horse, although still saddled and bridled, had apparently satisfied his hunger and thirst; the animal having, as his presence proved, escaped being captured by the Apaches; by dashing through the war-party, when his master had fallen from the saddle—the Indian mustangs being unable to overtake him.

Long sat Major Dale thus, neither of the miscreants daring to break the impressive silence; when, suddenly a peculiar sound, half-whistle and half-shriek, came feebly through the timber, as though proceeding from afar out on the prairie.

Instantly the magnificent bay horse of the scout uttered a long neigh, tossed his head, pricked his long ears forward, and then ambled through the undergrowth, toward the plain.

This act of the horse appeared to impress the old major greatly, and he saddled and bridled Nero, throwing a pair of the saddle-bags he had found, and which belonged to Broquier, upon him.

He had taken care to put the food and brandy into the pockets of the pair he had chosen.

Then, with a fierce look into the eyes of the two ruffians, which spoke as plain as words, "I'll see you later," he spurred from their view, on the back of Steve Speed's horse.

Upon clearing the timber, Major Dale discovered the bay horse galloping over the plain toward the south; and then he noticed a break upon its surface, and without delay again drove spurs.

But a very short time had elapsed, when the major galloped up to the mule, the horse of Steve hiding the scout from view; but the old planter sprung to the earth, with a slight curiosity upon his face, which changed rapidly to a strange mingling of joy and grief, when he caught sight of, and recognized the young scout, in such a terrible position.

"Father in Heaven! I thank Thee!"

Thus cried out the tortured young man, as he saw relief at hand.

Each word was lower than the former: the last being but a gasping whisper, as all sense left him—the effect of such a sudden change from the despair of death to certain release and life.

Without a word, Major Dale slashed free the raw-hide ropes, and prevented Steve from falling; he then laid him upon the sward, beyond the circular path which had been worn by the mule.

The old planter next released that animal, the poor beast staggering over the plain toward the timber.

Hastily pulling a brandy bottle from the saddle-bags, the major rushed to the side of the prostrate and now senseless scout; knowing well that Steve had thus suffered through his efforts to rescue Dora. The tears ran down the cheeks of the old man copiously, thus relieving his benumbed and overtaxed brain, and causing him to recover his reasoning faculties in a more perfect degree.

Soon Steve opened his eyes, at once recognizing Major Dale; and all the dread past was recalled vividly, and in an instant impressed upon his mind.

"May Heaven bless you, major!" the young man exclaimed at once; "may Heaven bless you, as it has guided you here to my rescue! But, your daughter—for mercy's sake, tell me where is Dora?"

"That is the question I would have asked you, had you given me time, Mr. Speed. I ask it now. Where, oh, where is my darling?"

"I have not seen my child, since that arch-fiend, Broquier, tore her from my arms, in the camp. I shall go mad, if she is not found. Yes, Steve, my friend, I shall become insane; I think I have been so already!"

Instantly the young scout staggered, painfully, to his feet, took up the bottle which the old planter had brought him, and poured brandy upon the benumbed portions of his body.

He then drank off the liquor copiously.

For a few moments, he leaned against the wheel, upon which he had suffered the tortures of the lost, and soon his strength began to come back to him.

He then gazed around him, his face contorted with anguish and desperation.

The ashes, and iron work, of the wagon, caught the young scout's eye; and, with a groan of agony, and an awful dread, he staggered toward the same, assisted by the major.

One look was sufficient to convince Steve, that his dread suspicions had been wrong.

There were no signs of human remains.

The ashes were not sufficient in quantity to conceal human bones.

Dora Dale had not been burned!

Her corpse was not to be seen.

Steve Speed clasped the arm of the old planter, and gazing into the face of the latter with a wild look, cried out:

"They have carried her away! Your daughter lives, Major Dale, and is a captive to the Apache fiends. But, I'll save her yet!"

"I swear it, by my hopes of Heaven!"

"Give me the weapons you have with you, major! You will find others secreted in the timber yonder, on the wagon-trail."

"You will find something more than arms, for there Bob Barr and myself caught and bound that fiend, Broquier, and his pard, Lasso Lije to trees. Bill, the other villain, was killed."

"Let those two wretches suffer, as I have suffered. We will yet force them to acknowledge their vile plot, and your innocence!"

Then taking the proffered bowie and pistols from the major, the young scout continued:

"I go to save your daughter, if man can save her! I shall not return without her. Farewell!"

Steve Speed spoke these last sentences in a rapid and excited manner, and then with difficulty managed to get astride of his horse.

"I'll follow you, Steve, when I get arms!" called out the old planter; "God speed you!"

But no sooner were the words out of the mouth of Major Dale, than away went the young scout at a mad gallop on the Apache trail toward the west, not so much as glancing back.

The old major mounted, spurred to the timber and soon reappeared; having found the wea-

pons that had been taken from Broquier, Bill and Lije, secreted in a thicket.

And away, a mile in the rear of Steve sped the distracted father, and before the latter had galloped three miles, up the Rio Leona, at terrific speed, dashed Bob Barr at the head of the men from the wagon-train.

Surely it seemed that Dora Dale was destined to be rescued from the merciless red demons of the Rio Pecos!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"I HAVE KEPT MY OATH."

NOT more than fifteen miles galloped the Apache war-party when they dashed through a ribbon of timber which marked the course of a creek, a tributary of the Rio Leona. On the west side of this they encamped.

Poor Dora still lay in a comatose state.

After a hasty repast, the Apaches, leaving a small number of their force to guard the camp, bore their dead to a level space a quarter of a mile below, where the death-dance was performed.

Then began the horrible torture of the wounded Texan, and the Mexican outlaws, the greater part of the day being consumed in the fiendish work, and it was sunset before the main portion of the war-party returned toward their camp—arriving within sight of the same to witness a startling spectacle.

A grand one it was, being Stampede Steve, whom they had believed to be, by that time, on the borders of death.

Just as the young scout had before dashed into the war-party, charging madly upon them, so now, upon the self-same horse, with revolver in each hand and knife between his teeth, his head bare and hair flying wild, they saw him bounding into their camp. Again were the rattling reports followed by death-yells and cries of agony and horror.

Before they could recover from their surprise, he flew, upon his superb steed, from their gaze, disappearing in the timber with their captive—the pale-faced maiden—in his arms!

Not until then, did the rallying yell of Lone Wolf ring on the evening air.

Out, on the east plain dashed Steve, the arms of Dora Dale clasped about his neck!

And on toward the pair, from the east, spurred Major Dale; but he halted, as the scout yelled:

"Back, major! the red demons will follow. Dora is saved! Look! there comes Bob with the men!"

There, sure enough, rode the teamster, at the head of more than a score of Texans and negroes, all armed to the teeth.

The Apaches, who had lashed their mustangs from the timber, now halted in astonishment. No pursuit was made, the savages evidently concluding that it would cost them too dear, to regain their captive, and to glut their revenge.

Away dashed our friends, with wild cheers—the happiest and most relieved party of Texans, within the boundaries of the Lone Star State.

Before the silvery moon had half reached the zenith from the eastern horizon, the brave band were standing in a circle, about the torture-wheel, to which Steve Speed had been bound; while, side by side, stood Count Broquier, or "Dusky Dick," and Lasso Lije, both secured fast to the wheel, and both nearly dead, with hunger, thirst, and terror—for death was staring them in the face at last!

In a group, within the circle of trainmen and emigrants, stood Steve, the Scout, supporting Dora Dale, Major Dale, and Bob Barr.

"I'll tell ther bull story, boyees, ef ye'll promise ter let me off from ther rope!"

Thus pleaded Lasso Lije, while Broquier glared at him like a fiend.

"I don't want ter be choked ag'in, fer I sw'ar I've hed enough o' hit. Shoot me plum' dead, an' I'll 'splain how I come ter be tuck in by this hyer cuss, Dusky Dick."

"Proceed!" said the scout, in a stern, clear voice. "I promise you that the major will agree to your request. Am I not right, Major Dale?"

The old planter bowed his head.

"Wa-al, bit war jist this-a-way. I war a honest man ontill I run ag'in Dick, hyer, but he p'isoned my mind; an' arter some considerable crookedness, we 'roved on ther Brazos, from Galveston, hev'in' ter lay low fer a while. We camped in ther timber, an' Dick he gut in wi' ther major's niggers, an' foun' out all 'bout his affairs."

"He gut a squint et ther leetle gal, an' he swored he'd marry her an' git all ther property. I laughed, but he played ther game purty nigh through ter win."

"Ther major used ter ride through ther timber, on a pertic'lar path, an' what does Dick do but send a letter ter a planter ter meet him in ther bottom, et sich a p'int an' time, an' he'd tell him whar ter find one o' his niggers what hed runned away."

"Wa-al, ther planter, what war a friend of ther major's, met Dick; an' my pard jabbed a knife into his heart, an' then laid the corpus plum' in a leetle 'open,' through which ther major allers rid. Jist then, 'long he comes on

his nag, an' we-uns hid in ther bush. When ther major see'd ther corpus, he gi'n a squeal an' jumped from his critter, runnin' ter ther dead planter an' kneelin' over him.

"Arter a minot, Dick an' I jist walked up ther path t'other side from whar ther major rid in; we-uns talkin' an' laughin' es though we didn't know nothin' 'bout what war ahead. Ther major riz up, pale es death, an' Dick he yells ter me: 'What's this? A murder's bin did hyer; Mister Simmons'—that means me—'help me ter s'cure ther villain!'

"Thet's what Dick spit out, es ther major knows. Then we-uns rushed for'ard an' grabbed him, an' he war ther most skeered human I ever see'd. He war tremblin' all over, an' c'u'dn't speak.

"We-uns used him sorter rough, an' I managed ter git his knife outen his belt 'thout his knowin' hit, an' jabbed ther weapon inter ther hole in ther breast o' ther corpus. Es soon es ther major c'u'd speak, he swore he didn't kill ther planter.

"Mr. Simmons," says Dick ter me; 'jist look et ther knife; p'raps hit may prove a witness 'gainst this man.'

"Ses I, 'Let him pull hit out hisself,' an' ther major drawed out ther knife, but his eyes stuck out, an' war es wild es a wolf's es he see'd hit war his own weapon, with his name onter hit!

"Thet's proof 'nough,' sez Dick ter me. 'Mr. Simmons, we must take this man ter ther officers o' the law.' Ther major war plum broke down, an' I thought he'd drap dead. 'Hit's too bad ter give ther man up ter justice, fer we doesn't know but he had good cause ter kill ther feller. Hit may be self-defense.

"Take ther knife, Mr. Simmons, an' we'll think this thing over; but we've got ter git away from hyer. Whar does yer live, Mr. Dale?"

"Thet's how Dick spoked, an' ther major jist p'inted his tremblin' finger toward his plantation.

"Mr. Simmons, yer better stop somewhars near ther body; but don't 'low nobody ter git a peep at yer. I'll go home with Mr. Dale, an' we'll talk this thing over.'

"Thet war how Dick 'ranged things; but how he worked ther riddle arter I -doesn't know. But he did work hit, an' kept ther major under his thumb; gittin', es he ses, five thousand dollars outen him. An' a bit ago, he war calkerlatin' 'bout marryin' ther darter, some way.

"Ther major allers thought Dick hed dead-wood on him, er he wouldn't hed him in his famby.

"Ther rest, I reckon, yer all knows; 'ceptin' 'bout ther box o' gold, what war tuck et ther camp. Hit war slung inter ther river, cluss by ther dead tree what we-uns used fer a bridge. Now yer hes ther clean fac's!

"Major Dale didn't kill his friend, although thar war proof 'nough ter hang him; an' Dick made ther best o' hit, until his luck tuck a flop-over.

"Now I'm ready ter be shuted, fer I sw'ar I'd ruther be dead than be tortured this-a-way any more!"

Broquier said nothing. His eyes were fixed, in a hopeless stare, upon Lije, during his long explanation.

"That is all we wish to know," said Steve. "Major Dale, I care not to take any active part in executin' Lasso Lije, for he has been, in his way, a victim to this fiend.

"I am in favor, if he will solemnly swear to live an honest life henceforth, of allowing him to depart."

"Let ther pore cuss go! We-uns hain't heard o' his wipin' anybody out," said Bob Barr.

This proposal was favored on all sides. Steve then released Lije and furnished him with food and water.

"Come, Major Dale!" said the young scout; "we must return to camp. We all need rest and care.

"Gentlemen, I deliver that miscreant into your hands. You know the fate he deserves. Execute it at once!"

So saying, Steve sprung upon his horse, lifted Dora up before him, and, in company with the major, who still rode Nero, proceeded over the plain; quartering toward the east, and the old camp, to which the train of wagons, at Bob's orders, had returned.

The latter took charge of the miserable wretch, Broquier, who was placed upon a horse, and conveyed back to the timber; where, soon after, he was hanged until he was dead, upon the very tree to which he had been bound by Steve, the Scout!

Lasso Lije was given his horse, equipments, and arms, and permitted to depart, pointing toward Mexico; and Steve afterward learned that his mercy had not been misplaced, but that Lije began at once to lead an honorable life, as a ranchero, on the Rio Nueces.

After the wounded had been cared for, the box of gold recovered from the river, and Dora had become more like herself, the train was started on the back trail once more; for, Major Dale had decided that he would not risk living at such an exposed portion of the frontier. He,

therefore, established a settlement on the San Miguel, which prospered exceedingly.

The emigrants who were with him became, in time, wealthy cattle-owners.

The change in the old planter, being now relieved from the persecution of Broquier, was simply wonderful.

Stephen Speed wedded Dora Dale, three months after the tragic occurrences which have been related; and no happier, or handsomer, couple ever stood side by side, to become linked for life.

Previous to his marriage, however, Steve went on a scout, for revenge, beyond the Rio Pecos, taking with him a party of fellow-scouts. While there they discovered rich deposits of "pocket" gold, which were carried back to the San Miguel, Steve's saddle-bags being heavily weighted with the golden nuggets.

The consequence of this was that he no longer felt as he did when a poor scout, and had more confidence when he asked of Major Dale the hand of her whose heart he already possessed.

And the old planter felt that he could not refuse his daughter to the man who, upon three distinct occasions, if not four, had rescued her from death; four, indeed, for doubtless the Apaches would have charged over Dora's lifeless body, had he not placed her under the wagon, when he prepared to make his grand charge singly into the war-party—ay, into the jaws of death!

THE END.

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